

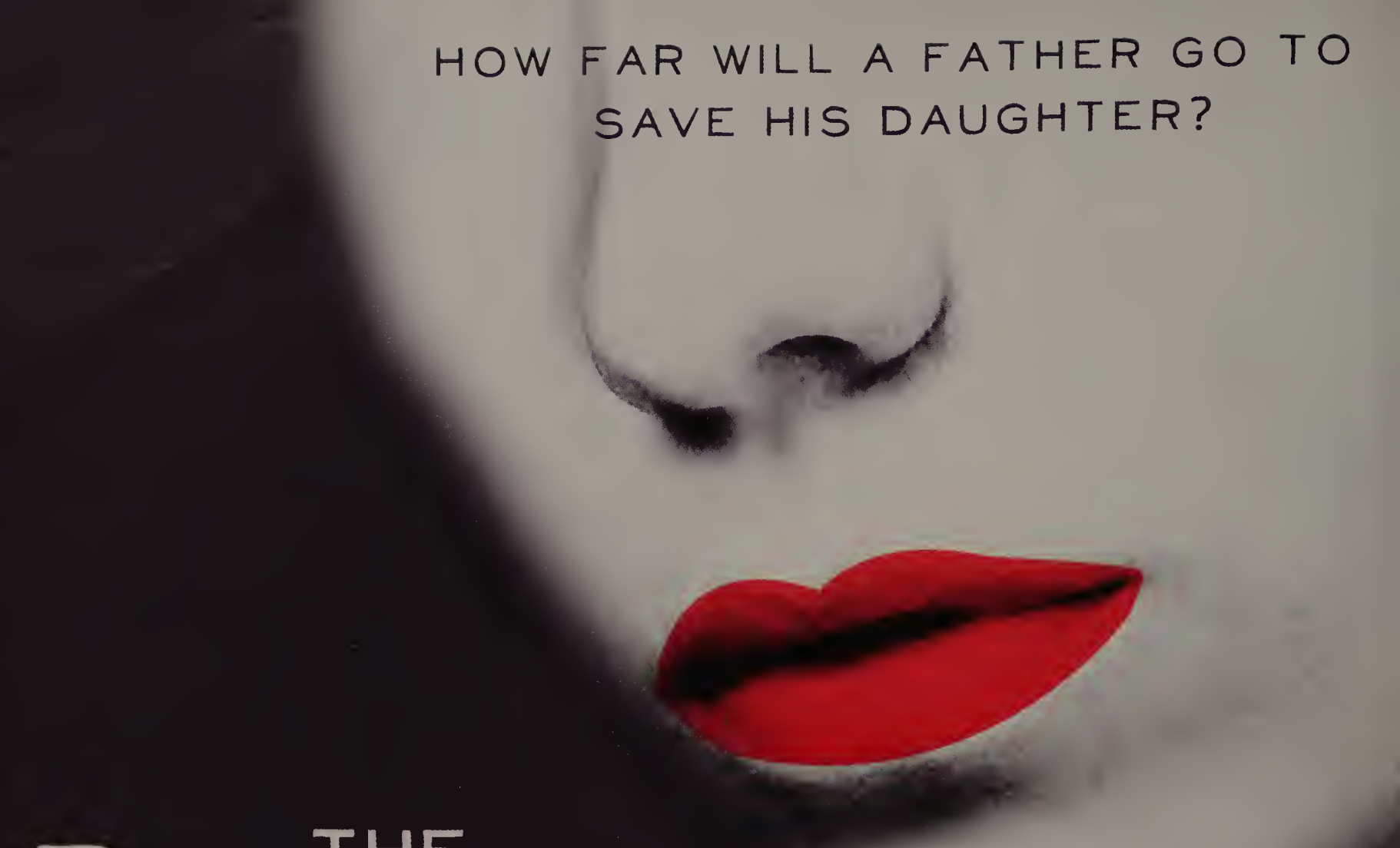
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Still hopeful

ACCESSIBLE, AFFORDABLE health care is a priority for people of faith who believe that love for one's neighbor is a fundamental moral imperative. For decades thoughtful Americans of all political persuasions have known that there is a health-care crisis in the United States. We spend far more money on health care than any other nation does, and we see no commensurate results in better health. Costs rise, insurance premiums soar, and millions are left without coverage. Many lower-income and poor Americans have no insurance and rely on hospital emergency rooms for basic health care.

A friend of mine is the CEO of a metropolitan medical center and a thoracic surgeon. He's traveled to emerging nations to teach and to consult with other health-care professionals. When I asked him how we measure up next to nations with universal health-care systems, he said that if you are critically ill and have money, the United States is the best place in the world to be. But if you are a little sick and have no money, you are better off in Cuba.

Many U.S. presidents have promised to address the situation, but although some have come close, it was President Barack Obama who finally got the job done. The Affordable Care Act may not be perfect, but it is the closest this nation has come to making health care available to all its citizens. How distressing, then, to watch a small faction within the Republican Party try to stop the ACA by holding the nation hostage and paralyzing the government.

I have great respect and gratitude for our system of government. I understand that the partisan dynamic in Washington is a healthy part of a democratic, two-party system, and I trust the

wisdom of voting citizens to ultimately make responsible decisions and elect honest, responsible representatives. But my respect and gratitude are being tried.

Locally, things are no better. Both Chicago and Illinois are in bad shape due to years of irresponsible decision making. Pension funds are seriously underfunded, two former governors are in jail, another former alderman is going to jail. There are plenty of reasons for cynicism instead of respect and gratitude.

But a visit to Washington just before the government shut-down tempered my cynicism. My wife and I flew into Reagan National Airport on a sunny day. The approach was breathtaking over the rolling, green hills of Pennsylvania and Maryland and as we descended along the Potomac River. The magnificent federal city stretched out to the left—the gleaming Capitol, the Washington Monument clad in classy scaffolding that seemed to accent its grace, the Lincoln Memorial. I was thrilled to see them all. We visited the FDR Memorial, and I was reminded that when the nation faced two very real threats, the Great Depression and a world war, strong, wise political leadership got us through. At the MLK Memorial, the figure of King emerges majestically from a mountain of rock. It reminded me that this nation has changed in the past and that, in spite of the stresses and political posturing, it will change again.

At the World War II Memorial it was raining softly, and we visitors kept a reverent silence. My family lost two uncles and a cousin in the war; two cousins made it home. I remember them all. The quiet dignity of the memorial reminded me of their sacrifice and of the nation's resilience. It offered balm for my cynicism—and hope.

WHO'S BLOGGING AT CHRISTIANCENTURY.ORG?

Carol Howard Merritt surveys the religious landscape at her blog **Tribal Church**

Steve Thorngate blogs about public life and culture at **In the World**

CCblogs highlights posts from the CENTURY's network of independent bloggers

Various bloggers write for **Blogging Toward Sunday** (on the lectionary) and
Then and Now (on U.S. religious history)

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Correction: An editing error introduced a mistake in John Burgess's article "Minority report" (Oct. 2). Metropolitan Hilarion of the Patriarchate of the Russia Orthodox Church attended a performance of his (not Bach's) *St. Matthew Passion*. Hilarion is himself a composer at the Lutheran cathedral in Moscow.

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Good and bad liberalism

Theo Hobson's "The good kind of liberalism" (Sept. 18) is both insightful and frustrating. The good elements are his retrieval of dimensions of liberal theology that support liberal democracy and his caution to critics of liberal theology not to jettison critical appreciation of liberal democratic polities.

The bad element can be located in the too easy distinction between good and bad traditions of liberal theology, which seems rather facile. Is the only good tradition in liberal theology found in support of the liberal state? Is the essence of all other forms of liberal theology really reforming Christianity "in the direction of rationalism and optimism about natural human capacities"? Liberal theology is a much more complex tradition, with richer resources for Christian thought and life, than Hobson intimates.

David Bard
Duluth, Minn.

I agree with Hobson's call for an end to the antiliberal era in theology. But what he calls a reinvented liberal theology sounds more like a resuscitated, cognitively impaired Christian chauvinism that sees itself allied with the liberal state.

It seems that Hobson takes "the particularity of Christianity," which is an undeniable historical reality, to constitute the basis for exclusive soteriological truth claims that need little or no rational warrant. He objects to what he calls the bad tradition of liberal theology, which he identifies as humanism, because he thinks it rejects Christian particularity. But what he really objects to is the refusal of rationalists and humanists (among others) to acknowledge "certain ritual practices and speech forms" as "intrinsically authoritative."

In effect, for Hobson, received tradition and authority appear to trump what theologian Franklin Gamwell calls "the modern commitment," which

affirms that our understandings must finally be validated by experience and reason.

If I understand him rightly, I largely agree with his affirmation of what he calls "good liberal theology." But I find his putative grounds for privileging authority and tradition to be both unreasonable and contrary to the best of my experience. Christianity needs a truly reformulated liberal theology that embraces both particularity and the modern commitment.

Byron C. Bangert
Bloomington, Ind.

Hobson claims that good Christian liberalism affirms "a deep affinity between the gospel and political and cultural liberty," or, more to the point, it "affirms the liberal state." Rightly, to my mind, Hobson is trying to address recent criticisms of the liberal state by Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank.

However, Hobson links Hauerwas and Milbank's critiques to Karl Barth, suggesting that Barth rejected "the tradition that affirms the affinity of Christianity and the liberal state." Moreover, in the decades since Barth, we're told, a "new breed of quasi-Barthian polemicist emerged," which includes Hauerwas. We are left with the impression that Barth is behind Hauerwas's critique of the American church's alleged love affair with political liberalism in the form of American democracy.

Hobson's recounting of the development from Barth to Hauerwas on the church and political liberalism is misleading at best. Indeed, Barth's 1946 essay "Christian Community and Civil Community" argues that the New Testament points the church in the direction of democracy (political liberalism) as the preferred option. That essay is often treated as Barth's "mature" political theology, which would indicate that in the end Barth supported the liberal

state and called the church to do the same.

How, then, Hobson can suggest that Barth is behind the recent critiques of American political liberalism is perplexing. Recent scholarship, including Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* and my own essay in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, claims just the opposite.

My concern is not simply a scholarly quibble about interpretation, but a concern that the riches of Barth's mature political theology will be overlooked or rejected by those interested in maintaining a link between the church and the liberal state. If there is to be a revived liberalism, particularly in regard to the church and the liberal state, let's ensure that it is indeed a good kind.

Todd V. Cioffi
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Hobson has rewritten history. Common to thinkers of the mid-20th century was a firm rejection of "progress," or the belief that democracy and technology would together usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all people. Against that optimism, thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr argued that *sin* defines the human condition. The essence of sin is self-deception. Whoever has power will convince themselves that they serve the good by exalting their power at the expense of other life. Every noble or "godly" act will thereby be corrupted.

In the sinful world, the Christian will struggle to correct injustice and to relieve suffering as best he or she is able to perceive them. But, being a sinner, he is always alert to a word from the Lord that may require him to change direction. His religion is prophetic. It moves him to seek a perspective of justice that transcends the norms of his particular society. And he never identifies his faith or the will of God with any option or "ism" which is abroad in the world.

Wilmer MacNair
Lafayette, La.

October 30, 2013

Pastor as pope

Early this month, Pope Francis visited the Italian town of Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis, to reaffirm his connection to his namesake and restate his own mission. “This is a good occasion to invite the Church to strip itself of worldliness,” he declared, saying that the Catholic Church and its pastors must relinquish all “vanity, arrogance and pride” and humbly serve the poorest members of society.

Though a Jesuit himself, Pope Francis has put a Franciscan face on the papacy, beginning with his choice of his name and his decision to ride in a Ford Focus (or take the bus) and to live in a simple room rather than the papal apartment. “How I would like a church that is poor and for the poor,” Francis said on assuming office. His public statements have consistently called attention to the condition of refugees, the shipwrecked, the disabled, and the sick. In one of his several frank and wide-ranging interviews with journalists, Francis lamented that church leaders “have often been narcissists, flattered and thrilled by their courtiers. The [Vatican] court is the leprosy of the papacy.”

To some observers, Francis is a radically different man from the one who as archbishop in Argentina was a cautious administrator and found ways to accommodate the brutal dictators who ruled the country in the 1970s and 1980s (see the review of books on Francis, p. 28). In his eight months as pope he has dramatically changed the face and tone of the Catholic Church.

Apparently determined to go beyond stylistic or symbolic gestures, he has formed an eight-member Council of Cardinals charged with reining in the Vatican bureaucracy and improving financial accountability. Reportedly also under discussion in the council are pastoral matters such as care for divorced Catholics.

While it is too soon to know whether the pope’s Franciscan vision of the church portends major institutional reforms, Francis has generated enormous excitement by his style of leadership. His comments on homosexuality (“Who am I to judge?”) and on issues of gay marriage, abortion and contraception (“it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time”) are what Vatican watcher John Allen has called “pastoral reflections.” On occasions when other popes would reaffirm doctrine, Francis seeks to deepen relationships and open conversations. He knows that the way faith is presented makes a difference: people are rarely argued into the church, but they are often loved into it. “The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules,” he is willing to admit. “The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you.”

However his papacy unfolds, Francis is renewing all Christians with his Franciscan vision of the church and with the evangelical power of his pastoral voice.

Francis knows that the way faith is presented makes a difference.

CENTURY marks

SECOND CHANCE FOOD: About 40 percent of the food in the U.S. gets thrown away. Doug Rauch, past president of Trader Joe's grocery store chain, plans to do something with the perfectly edible food that gets tossed because it is past its sell-by date and with the foods that never make it to the market because they are cosmetically damaged. Next year he plans to open an operation called Daily Table in Dorchester, Massachusetts. A cross between a grocery store and a restaurant, Daily Table will prepare mostly fruits and vegetables for "speed-scratch" cooking, and the food will be sold at prices that compete with fast-food meals (NPR, September 21).

GOOD NEWS IN TURKEY: St. Giragos Armenian Church in Diyarbakir, Turkey, severely damaged during

the 1915 massacre and deportation of Christians, recently underwent an extensive \$3 million restoration. It has plans to hold regular services. The reopening of this church is part of a re-evaluation by Kurdish Muslims of the role their ancestors played in the killing of minorities, including Armenians. The Kurdish city paid 15 percent of the renovation cost (RNS).

IN NEED OF PRAYER: The prayers of Barry C. Black, the first African American and Seventh-day Adventist to be chaplain of the U.S. Senate, have become pointed during the government shutdown. "Deliver us from the hypocrisy of attempting to sound reasonable while being unreasonable," he prayed one morning. After he prayed on another occasion for God to "remove

from them that stubborn pride which imagines itself to be above and beyond criticism," Senate majority leader Harry Reid seemed genuinely contrite. "I think we've all here in the Senate kind of lost the aura of Robert Byrd," Reid said, invoking the long-term senator from West Virginia who valued gentility and compromise (*New York Times*, October 6).

CUTTING CHILD POVERTY: Monthly subsidies to families with children are becoming common in developed countries. The UK gives the equivalent of \$140 per month for each child, Germany \$250. "If we issued a \$400 monthly payment to each child, and cut tax subsidies for children in higher-income families, we would cut child poverty from 22 percent to below 10 percent," says Austin Nichols of the Urban Institute. "If we further guaranteed one worker per family a job paying \$15,000 a year, and each family participated, child poverty would drop to under 1 percent," Nichols figures (MetroTrends Blog, September 16).

NOT IN OUR PARKING LOT: For seven years a number of Christian ministries have been serving the poor and homeless in the parking lot of a Dauphin County administrative building in Pennsylvania, but they've been told they must find a new site. A bank that leases space from Dauphin County complained about instances of public urination and defecation and said that its employees have been harassed by homeless people. Representatives of the mission groups don't deny those problems but say that if they don't have a centralized location, the volunteers and food will dwindle and that if the services are removed to a more remote location, the homeless people will have difficulty finding them (*Patriot-News*, September 20).



"Must I sacrifice family for career?"

LEFT BEHIND? The civil war in Syria has revived apocalyptic fever among fundamentalist Christians, especially those who follow a dispensationalist view of the Bible. In a survey conducted by LifeWay Research, 32 percent of Americans surveyed said they agree with this statement: “I believe the battles in Syria are all part of the prophecies of the Book of Revelation.” Isaiah 17:1 is used as a proof text: “Behold, Damascus will cease from being a city, and it will be a ruinous heap.” Hal Lindsey, author of the 1970 bestseller *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, argues that only nuclear weapons, perhaps used by Israel, could cause such devastation (ABP).

THE WORLD AHEAD: When global warming activist Bill McKibben is asked by people how to prepare for the world that climate change will bring, he responds: live “anyplace with a strong community.” When asked where to find a community strong enough to survive the social divisions that global warming will bring, he says: you make them. (*New York Review of Books*, October 24).

FINAL ACT: Catholic theologian Hans Küng, who has long been at odds with the Vatican, is considering one final act of defiance—assisted suicide. Küng, who suffers from Parkinson’s disease, writes in the final volume of his memoirs—just released—that people have the right to surrender their lives to God through suicide if life becomes intolerable due to pain, suffering or dementia. He argues that such a suicide isn’t an act of murder but rather an act of surrender and of voluntarily returning life to the Creator. Assisted suicide is legal in his native Switzerland (Thomson Reuters).

WHERE’S JUDAS? Antonin Scalia, a conservative justice on the Supreme Court, told an interviewer for *New York* magazine that he believes in hell and the devil. The interviewer wondered whether he thought she would go to hell since she doesn’t believe in it. Scalia reiterated traditional Catholic doctrine, saying that everyone would go to heaven or hell but that you don’t have to be Catholic to go to heaven. He refused to condemn the reporter to hell. “I don’t even know whether Judas

“This may be the way the world ends—not with a bang but with a temper tantrum.”

— Economist **Paul Krugman** on the fight in Washington over the government shutdown and the potential crisis were there to be a government default (*New York Times*, September 29)

“Churches do their best to cope with need in their communities but the government shutdown and a default on U.S. debt would have economic impacts that would just swamp what we’re doing through our congregations.”

— **David Beckmann**, president, Bread for the World (RNS)

Iscaiot is in hell . . . He may have recanted and had severe penance just before he died,” Scalia said (*New York*, October 6).

DIGITAL READING: In a national survey 35 percent of people polled who own e-readers or tablets report reading more books now than they did before having such devices. This increase is especially pronounced among people ages 18 to 40. Adults with a reading device report reading 18 books a year; adults without one say they read an average of 11 books each year. Forty percent of adults now own an e-reader or tablet (*USA Today*, October 7).

THANKSGIVUKKAH: This is the first year that Thanksgiving Day in the United States and the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah coincide, which has led to a flurry of Jewish levity and commercialism. A nine-year-old New York boy raised over \$48,000 on Kickstarter for his trademarked “Menurkey,” a turkey-shaped menorah. A mother outside Boston teamed with an artist to create and sell Thanksgivukkah- or Turkukkah-themed shirts, cards and posters. Ten percent of sales are going to a Jewish hunger relief organization. Hanukkah actually begins the evening before Thanksgiving (AP).

POOR CHILDREN IN AMERICA

SOURCE: CHILDREN’S DEFENSE FUND

States with child poverty rates* 25 percent or higher:



*Poverty is defined as an annual income below \$23,492 for the average family of four—\$1,958 a month, \$452 a week or \$64 a day.

Out of Syria

CYRIL KARIM is archbishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch for the Eastern United States of America, which is affiliated with the Syrian (Oriental) Orthodox Church of Syria. The Syrian Orthodox Church counts 32 parishes and 33,000 members in the United States. Born in Syria, Archbishop Karim studied in Egypt and Ireland. He is the author of a children's book, In the Tree House. In New Jersey, where the archdiocese has its offices, he led protests against the possibility of an American military strike on Syria.

Tell us a bit about Syrian Christianity.

On my first visit to the United States, I was wearing my clerical robes and the man sitting next to me asked, "Are you a

language of Christ, the apostles and the early church. We use a Syrian dialect of Aramaic that is called Syriac.

Of course, there are many other Christian churches in Syria: the Antiochian Orthodox Church (also called the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch), as well as Catholic and Protestant churches that were formed in the last three centuries, largely by taking members from the Orthodox churches. But now relations among the Christians in Syria are very good.

What has been the history of Syrian Orthodox Christians in the United States?

The presence of Syrian Orthodox people in the United States goes back to

"The Assad regime recognized us as the indigenous people of Syria, who preserved the country's identity and culture."

priest?" I said, "Yes, I am a priest in the Syrian Orthodox Church." He said, "There are Christians in Syria?"

Then he asked, "When did you convert to Christianity?" I told him, "I really don't remember, but it must have been some 2,000 years ago." Unfortunately, there is much ignorance in the West about Christians in the Middle East.

Our church is the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch. Antioch was the place where the early apostles established themselves when they fled persecution in Jerusalem. It was in Antioch that Christians first called themselves Christians.

For our liturgy we use Aramaic, the

the 1850s. The first organized parish was in Newark, New Jersey, in 1907. Since then waves of immigrant groups have come, either fleeing persecution or looking for better economic conditions. After 1991 and again after 2003 our churches have been receiving refugees from Iraq. Now with the war in Syria, God only knows how many people will end up here. They will try their best to make it.

So the Syrian Orthodox Church has people from many nationalities?

The word *Syrian* in the Syrian Orthodox Church does not mean Syrian as a matter of nationality. Our community of believers existed, obviously,



before the nation of Syria. We gave the nation our name, not the other way around.

Only about 30 to 40 percent of the people in our parishes come from the country of Syria. Many of them are first-, second- or in some cases third-generation immigrants. The rest come from other areas in the Middle East such as Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon.

Do you use Syriac in your worship services in the United States?

We do use Syriac, but we also use English—and in some parishes Arabic.

How do Syrian Orthodox people view the Assad regime?

The majority of our people, whether from Syria or from another country, see the Assad regime as friendly. Our church in Syria has been well treated by the Assad regime.

The regime recognized us as the indigenous people of Syria, who kept the language and preserved the country's identity and culture. Christians pioneered in teaching. Christians were

looked upon as highly educated, high-achieving people. We never experienced discrimination or ill-treatment by the majority of the Syrian people, who are Sunni. Until recently, Syria was not a place where you asked about someone's religious affiliation.

Now we see Christians being targeted, churches being bombed, clergy being killed or kidnapped. Two of our archbishops were kidnapped on April 22, and there has been no word from them. All we know is that they were kidnapped by jihadists from Chechnya. What business do they have in Syria? I don't know.

Are all Christian voices united in their support of the regime?

Certainly there are Christians who are standing with the so-called revolution. These are people who are looking for real reforms in the country, who are proponents of democracy. They are a very small minority, and they are mostly affiliated with political parties that oppose the Assad regime, such as the Communist Party.

When I say that the majority of Christians are not against the regime, I do not mean that we support it no matter what. All of us have criticisms about the way things were going in Syria—such as the amount of corruption among public officials and the lack of many freedoms. But in Syria, we Christians were left alone to live and to witness to our faith. We could not seek to convert others, but we lived with Islam peacefully for 1,500 years.

Our fear is about what happens next. Who is going to take over? Al-Qaeda is much stronger on the ground than the Free Syrian Army. Al-Qaeda forces are eradicating the army and appear to be the strongest group in Syria now. If al-Qaeda takes over, what will happen to Christians?

Why do you oppose a strike by the United States against Syria?

Because a strike will not help anybody. It will not help Americans pursue their interests—although, to be honest, I don't know what the U.S. interest is in Syria. Americans speak of

"national interests," but what are they? Syria is 7,000 miles away from here.

What are you doing to help Christians inside Syria?

There are millions of displaced people inside Syria. We are sending money for rent and food. We are also taking care of refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and other areas.

Unfortunately, many of Christianity's ancient places in Syria have been destroyed. In Homs, the Church of the Virgin Mary of the Holy Belt, which can be traced to the first century—when the first Christians worshiped in a cave on that spot—was destroyed in fighting between the Islamists and the government.

Are you in touch with Christians in refugee camps?

Christians do not usually go to refugee camps. One reason is that such camps very often exist for families of the fighters against the government. Most of these are Islamic fighters, and Christians cannot live with such groups in which there is no tolerance. Second, Christians tend to go to places where there are sizable populations of other Christians, like Lebanon. Third, few of the displaced Christians will go back to Syria, so they are not sitting in camps waiting to be resettled. They are going to Turkey or Lebanon in order to go on to a third country.

Iraq provides an example. Within ten years, 75 percent of Christians have left Iraq. The same thing, unfortunately, will happen in Syria.

CC

—Amy Frykholm

Put on the new self

Colossians 3:10

Twenty-five years after Praying the Prayer,
when my new life was supposed to snap in place
like elastic, the smell of crisp, store-rack cotton
propelling me to run with endurance
toward a finish line I could not see,

I lie on the couch with a sour-smelling terrier
curled in the crook of my leg. Today
I will bathe him, punch through three Keurig cups,
run a trumpet book to the grammar school.
No martyrdom here, no preaching in the streets,
though tomorrow I might plant another bag of daffodils
so in April I can kneel in the gold
and thank All Things New once more.

But now I turn my eyes to things above
in the window, squirrels gibbering in the canopy
of my backyard maple: I doze and wake
to their claws skittering down the trunk,
mentally etch the face of Christ in the bark.

He doesn't need me. He wants me.
Neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, tired
nor on fire. I will slip into newness again,
fluff the shaking, sodden dog in His name
as He drapes me with his soft and silent weaving.

Tania Runyan

Tracking the ‘nominals’

They are rarely at worship services and are indifferent to doctrine. And they’re surprisingly fuzzy on Jesus.

These are the Jewish Americans sketched in a new Pew Research Center survey, 62 percent of whom said Jewishness is largely about culture or ancestry and just 15 percent of whom said it’s about religious belief.

A similar kind of person emerges in studies of other religious groups.

Meet the “nominals”—people who claim a religious identity but may live it in name only. They’re proud—but not practicing—Catholics. They’re Protestants who don’t think Jesus is essential to their salvation.

And they’re Jews who say they belong to the tribe by way of ancestry or culture, not religion. Indeed, many miss the most fundamental divide between Judaism and Christianity: the Pew survey found 34 percent of Jews say it’s OK to see Jesus as the Messiah and still call themselves Jewish.

“They are not saying Judaism can allow belief in Jesus. They are saying if you are born a Jew, reared as Jewish and convert to Christianity, I still consider you a Jew,” said Alan Cooperman, deputy director of the Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project, and a coauthor of the Jewish study.

Catholic researchers see similar expressions of loyalty melded with theological confusion.

Sacraments Today, a 2008 study by Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, found most Catholics (77 percent) are proud to be Catholic but:

- Only 55 percent say they are practicing their faith.
- Most say they can be good Catholics

without going to weekly mass (68 percent).

- Helping the poor and needy is a moral obligation for most (68 percent) but fewer people (61 percent) see the sacraments as essential.

- Less than half of Catholics (43 percent) look to the pope and bishops when they make moral choices.

Each generation’s views on sacraments, mass and moral life also are less tied to Catholicism than their parents’. Only half of the so-called millennials (born after 1983) say they’re “proud to be Catholic.”

When CARA tallies the number of U.S. Catholics, it lists 66.8 million counted by the church, but 78.2 million according to surveys that ask people their religious identity.

Protestants, too, stray from core Christian teaching while clinging to the Christian label.

“‘Survey Christians’ are often people who feel guilty saying they are not as religious as their parents,” said Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research. “They don’t want to say ‘atheist’—since that’s way too far—but they are not really ‘committed,’ so they just say ‘Christian’ since it is the default category from their heritage.”

That lack of doctrinal knowledge is especially apparent when researchers cut to the theological core: questions of salvation.

In a 2011 LifeWay survey of pastors and people who attend Protestant churches, one in four churchgoers (26 percent) agreed that “if a person is sincerely seeking God, he/she can obtain eternal life through religions other than Christianity.”

This is also particularly true among the young. A separate LifeWay study of 1,200 young adults under age 30 found:

- Nearly three in four (72 percent) call themselves “more spiritual than religious.”

- More than two in three say they rarely or never pray with others, attend worship services or read the Bible or other sacred texts.

- More than one in four (28 percent) said God is “just a concept,” and four in ten said the devil is merely a symbol.

- Only half said that “believing in Jesus Christ is the only way to get to heaven.”

Thom Rainer, the president of LifeWay Christian Resources who cited the research in his book on these 18- to 29-year-old millennials, called the nominals “mushy Christians.” Most, he said, “are just indifferent.”

Still, nominals care enough to choose some kind of label to identify, however thinly, with a religious tradition. Put another way, nominals are not synonymous with the “nones,” the one in five Americans who claim no religious identification.

Yet both groups may share a characteristic: they are unlikely to age into religious practice beyond personal prayer, said author and scholar Phyllis Tickle. She is working on a new book about the growing closeness of Jewish and Christian expression in America.

“The old saw is that after they married and had children, people would come back to organized faith. It is not true now. People under 40 are not returning to their inherited church,” she said.

In her studies on contemporary Christianity, she sees it morphing from “inherited, hierarchical, location-based (churched) faith” toward forms that discard those strictures.

Believers today are still interested in a communal expression of faith. They just want a more “nimble” religion, she said. She’s also optimistic, saying, “We are in pretty good shape as believers.”

Another scholar, Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity After Religion*, has a slightly different forecast.

"I suspect that many nominals will move toward none, while a smaller percentage will embrace their inherited faiths in more personal, experiential ways," said Bass. "Generally, being part of a faith tradition 'in name only' will be increasingly hard to maintain as society grows more accepting of people who have no religious ties." —Cathy Lynn Grossman, RNS

Poll on American Jews locates winners, losers

As the proverbial dust settles on a new Pew Research Center poll of 3,475 Jewish Americans released October 1, experts are starting to sort out the study's "winners" and "losers."

Winners:

• Orthodox Jews

Yitzchok Adlerstein, an Orthodox rabbi, summed it up in the Orthodox journal *Cross-Currents*: The survey, he wrote, offers a "depressing outlook for the future of any continuation of Jewish affiliation outside of Orthodoxy."

Among the study's findings: Orthodox Jews are among the most religiously committed groups in the country. They are younger on average and tend to have much larger families than the overall Jewish population.

The average number of children born to Orthodox Jews (4.1) is about twice the overall Jewish average (1.9), suggesting that Orthodoxy's share of the Jewish population will grow, despite not-so-good retention rates.

Adlerstein's article pointed to what he saw as a "serious underreporting of Orthodox strength." For example, he said, many Jews—perhaps tens of thousands—identify with the Chabad-Lubavitch movement whose members don't always consider themselves Orthodox, though they meet the study's definitions.

It should not be surprising that the Orthodox movement, much like strict forms of Islam and Christianity, is strong,

said David Wolpe, Conservative rabbi of the Los Angeles-based Sinai Temple. "Why should Jews be different?" he said.

But Wolpe cautioned against reading too much into trends. "Fifty years ago, they were saying goodbye to Orthodoxy," he said. "Extrapolation is necessary but also notoriously tricky."

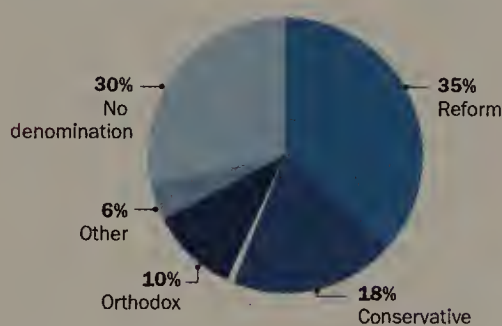
• Israel

Emotional attachment to Israel has not waned among American Jews in the past decade. Overall, 70 percent of Jews said they feel either very attached or somewhat attached to Israel, essentially unchanged since 2000–2001. In addition, 43 percent of Jews have been to Israel, and of those, 23 percent have visited more than once.

Although many American Jews express reservations about Israel's approach to the peace process, 40 percent say they believe God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people.

Tellingly, more than 40 percent of

Jewish denominational affiliation



Source: Pew Research Center 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews, Feb. 20–June 13, 2013. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

those surveyed said caring about Israel is a big part of what it means to be Jewish.

Mixed bag:

• Reform Jews

The survey shows that Reform Judaism continues to be the largest Jewish denomination in the United States. Of all U.S. Jews, 35 percent identify as Reform.

Joshua Stanton, a Reform rabbi in New Jersey, said he took pride in the study's findings. "I think the Reform movement can adapt most quickly and continue its process of growth," he said. "It connects the wisdom of the past to changes taking place in the present and has since its founding."

But while the Reform movement may

seem young and future-oriented, its members have the highest rates of intermarriage among denominationally affiliated Jews. Fully half of all Reform Jews are in interfaith marriages. The study suggests that children of interfaith marriages are far more likely to marry outside the faith.

In addition, Reform Jews report low rates of religious vitality. Only 16 percent of Reform Jews say religion is very important in their lives (compared to 83 percent of Orthodox Jews).

Losers:

• Conservative Jews

Only 18 percent of Jews identify with the Conservative movement. Thirty percent of those raised Conservative have become Reform Jews, while 28 percent of those raised Reform have left the ranks of Jews by religion entirely.

In addition, the median age of Conservative Jews (55) was highest of all the Jewish denominations. The aging of Conservative Jews should be a cause for concern, said Jason Miller, a Detroit-based Conservative rabbi.

"I grew up at a time when Conservative Judaism's vibrancy was felt in the teen youth groups and Ramah summer camping movement," said Miller. "I don't think that vibrancy will be felt among our children. To sustain a movement, there must be a committed, young demographic."

Caveat: Some rabbis said they were uncomfortable with judging "winners" or "losers."

"The big issue, in my opinion, is how the denominations use this information in light of the narratives they've created, which define and sustain themselves," said Josh Yuter, rabbi of the Stanton Street Shul (Orthodox) in New York City.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, agreed that there was a danger in trying to award winners and losers to one denomination or the other.

"The Pew study reveals challenges and opportunities everywhere across the spectrum of Jewish life. What's important is that the Jewish people win, which will happen as we continue to find ever more inspiring ways to broaden and deepen Jewish life." —Mennachem Wecker, RNS

RNS / COURTESY PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Hobby Lobby will offer Jewish holiday items

The owner of the Hobby Lobby craft store chain, under fire because his stores did not carry Hanukkah merchandise and because of a reported employee's remark that offended many Jews, has apologized and announced that some stores will begin to carry Jewish holiday items.

In statements October 3 and 4, company president Steve Green said Hobby Lobby is sorry for comments "that may have offended anyone, especially our Jewish customers and friends," and that it will carry Jewish-themed items in New York and New Jersey by early November "to test the market."

That's in time for Hanukkah, which begins this year on November 27.

The company credited "overwhelming demand in the Northeast" for its decision and added: "We appreciate the feedback we've received from our customers, and we hope these products will meet their needs."

Some have long taken issue with Hobby Lobby's wide choice of Christmas items but lack of any Hanukkah merchandise. The apology and the merchandising decision are likely to gratify some within the Jewish community and elsewhere who wondered whether Green's conservative Christianity translated into a disregard for Jewish customers.

Suspensions heightened after a report that a Hobby Lobby employee in the company's Marlboro, New Jersey, store responded, "We don't cater to you people," when asked if the store carried bar mitzvah cards.

Several news outlets, including Religion News Service, wrote about the controversy, stirring a heated online debate in which reactions ranged from cries of anti-Semitism to cries that Green is being demonized for his strong Christian faith.

On October 4, the Anti-Defamation League, a national group that counters anti-Semitism, accepted Hobby Lobby's apology and strongly defended the company.



RNS / SALLY MORROW

CHRISTIAN BUSINESS: Steve Green, president of Hobby Lobby, speaks at the Religion Newswriters Association conference in Austin, Texas, on September 26.

"ADL firmly believes that the religious views of a business owner cannot be a basis to infringe upon the legal rights of others, but a store choosing not to carry Hanukkah items does not violate anyone's rights," read the statement. "Moreover, we have no reason to believe that Hobby Lobby has refused to stock Hanukkah items because of hostility to Jews or anti-Semitism."

In Hobby Lobby's apology, Green outlined his connections to the Jewish community in the U.S. and Israel.

"Our family has a deep respect for the Jewish faith and those who hold its traditions dear," read the statement. "We're proud contributors to Yad Vashem [Israel's official Holocaust museum] as well as to other museums and synagogues in Israel and the United States."

The statement also noted that the company has "previously carried merchandise in our stores related to Jewish holidays."

Marlboro blogger Ken Berwitz—who ignited the recent controversy with his account of Hobby Lobby's responses to questions about the lack of Jewish items—said he was "gratified" by Green's most recent announcement.

Green, a conservative billionaire, owns more than 550 Hobby Lobby stores nationwide, all of which are closed on Sunday. He is also known for his lawsuit

against President Obama's health-care law, which he said forces him to provide employees with free insurance coverage for some contraceptive services that he objects to on religious grounds. —RNS

North Carolina Catholics leave council of churches

At a time when Pope Francis is calling for the church to give up its obsession with homosexuality and abortion, North Carolina's Roman Catholic dioceses are severing a long-held ecumenical bond over those issues.

Unable to resolve their differences, the dioceses of Raleigh and Charlotte have decided to withdraw their membership from the North Carolina Council of Churches effective at the end of the year.

For more than 30 years, North Carolina enjoyed a unique ecumenical alliance between Protestants and Catholics.

The council's members joined to address issues such as economic justice, equality and peace. Recently, they pressed the U.S. Senate for transparency on torture of detainees held after 9/11, for example.

But in a joint statement, Bishop Michael Burbidge of Raleigh and Bishop Peter Jugis of Charlotte, said the alliance has resulted in religious leaders being associated with positions "that are at times in contradiction with their practice and the teaching" of their faith.

Specifically, the state council opposed a state constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage. The amendment passed in 2012 with the enthusiastic support of the two Catholic dioceses. And while the council has no position on abortion, the Catholic Church views it as an evil that must be opposed.

"We just were not able to resolve those issues, and they felt they could not continue as members," said George Reed, the council's executive director.

The North Carolina Council of Churches was founded in 1935 and today includes members of 18 Christian denominations and eight individual congregations.

The Raleigh diocese joined in 1977. Over the years, the council staff included a Catholic nun who helped the group craft its farmworker, immigration and peace initiatives, said Aleta Payne, the council's press director.

The loss of the membership of the two dioceses will cost the council 10 percent of its yearly budget or about \$12,000.

The Catholic Church is not a member body of the National Council of

Churches, but regional councils sometimes include Catholics, said National Council of Churches press liaison Philip E. Jenks.

The North Carolina bishops said they hoped to continue working with the council on issues they agree on such as immigration reform, just wages, poverty and ending the death penalty.

"Half of the purpose of the Council of Churches was to promote a model of

Christian unity across denominations that have divided us," Reed said.

Lifelong Catholic Alberta Hairston, the council's board president, said the move "has been personally difficult."

"I understand where the bishops are coming from," she said. "But there's not that many vehicles for people of varying faith traditions to come together and discuss issues that promote the common good." —Amanda Greene, RNS

After long slump, number of Catholic seminarians on the rise

AFTER DECADES of glum trends—fewer priests, fewer parishes—the Catholic Church in the United States has a statistic to cheer: more men are now enrolled in graduate-level seminaries—the main pipeline to the priesthood—than in nearly two decades.

This year's tally of 3,694 graduate theology students represents a 16 percent increase since 1995 and a 10 percent jump since 2005, according to Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).

Seminary directors cite more encouragement from bishops and parishes, the draw of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and the social-justice-minded Pope Francis, and a growing sense that the church is past the corrosive impact of the sexual abuse crisis that exploded in 2002.

Ultimately, it was "a calling in my heart," says Kevin Fox. He walked away from his electrical engineering degree and a job in his field, working with CT scanners, to enter St. Mary Seminary in Wickliffe, Ohio, this fall.

"I always had an inkling that I might want to be a priest and my parish priest told me he thought I might be called," said Fox, age 24. "But I put it aside."

With a fresh degree from Case Western Reserve and his first post-graduation job, Fox soon realized the secular path "wasn't filling my soul with joy."

Now, after years of pure science, Fox is immersed in pure theology—and loving it. The challenges of the culture, such

as crude jokes from strangers about the abuse crisis, have not dissuaded him.

"I feel the church has done a great deal to deal with (preventing) abuse and the seminary took a lot of care in screening and training us to make sure we are the good guys," Fox said.

Fox is one of 72 students currently enrolled in the undergraduate and graduate programs at St. Mary, the highest number in decades, said Mark Latcovich, president and rector.

Craig Cox, rector of St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California, said the upward trend leading to their current record class of 92 graduate seminarians began six years ago. He also cited "a renewal of idealism," a stronger push for vocations by priests and bishops, and "receding damage" from the abuse crisis.

Cox says his students range in age from 22 to 45. While they're younger than previous classes, they bring "a great level of maturity" to get through a rigorous admissions process.

CARA's new statistical look at the church shows the seminary-to-priesthood patterns and other shifts in American Catholic life:

- New ordinations won't catch up to the thousands of retirements and deaths of '60s-era priests: the total number continues to slide from 58,632 priests in 1965 to 39,600 in 2013.

- The number of parishes without a resident priest is still growing—up from 3,251 in 2,005 to 3,554 now.

- A two-decade-long trend of parish consolidations and closings has led to

fewer parishes where pastoral care is led by a deacon, religious sister or brother, or a layperson. Their number peaked in 2005 at 553 and now is down to 428.

Blame demographics, says CARA's senior research associate, Mary Gautier.

"Catholics don't live where they lived 15 years ago. They've moved south and west, from urban to suburban areas and they didn't take their parishes with them," Gautier said. "The smaller, older lay-led places without a resident priest are often the first to be closed."

The church keeps growing—1 percent a year. CARA offers two totals, varying by the source: 78.2 million if you go by self-identification recorded in surveys; 66.8 million if you go by the "Official Catholic Directory" where parishes report their numbers.

Meanwhile, the declining numbers of people who identify with Protestant denominations has led to falling numbers in their seminaries since 2006, said Eliza Brown, spokeswoman for the Association of Theological Schools, which represents more than 270 seminaries.

Between 2006 and 2012, the number of students enrolled in master of divinity programs at Protestant and non-denominational Christian seminaries fell from 31,532 to 29,249, Brown said.

"Their congregations are less able to afford full-time, theologically educated clergy," she said. "And students, who graduate with debts, can't afford to take part-time or low-paying pulpit positions." —Cathy Lynn Grossman, *USA Today*

Evangelicals 'worse' than Catholics on sexual abuse

A Liberty University law professor and grandson of Billy Graham has told reporters that he thinks evangelicals are worse than Catholics when it comes to responding to sexual abuse by clergy.

"Protestants can be very arrogant when pointing to Catholics," Boz Tchividjian, executive director of Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE), told journalists attending the Religion Newswriters Association conference in Austin, Texas.

"The Protestant culture is defined by independence," Tchividjian said in comments reported September 26 by Religion News Service.

Evangelicals often frown upon transparency and accountability, he said, as many Protestants rely on scripture more than religious leaders, compared to Catholics. Abusers condemn gossip in their efforts to keep people from reporting abuse, he said. Victims are also told to protect the reputation of Jesus.

Tchividjian said too many Protestant institutions have sacrificed souls in order to protect their institutions. "We've got the Gospels backwards," he said.

Advocates for victims of clergy sexual abuse agreed.

"I say 'thank you' to Boz Tchividjian for continuing to publicly speak out about the extent of clergy abuse and cover-ups among evangelicals," said Christa Brown, a blogger who details her uphill battle to report her molestation decades earlier by a Southern Baptist youth minister in a 2009 book titled *This Little Light: Beyond a Baptist Preacher Predator and His Gang*.

"For those of us—and we are many—who were abused by the sexual predation of evangelical ministers and re-abused by the bullying of other evangelical leaders who wanted the abuse kept quiet, Tchividjian's words of truth are a balm for the heart," Brown said.

David Clohessy, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), said it's tough to compare denominations' handling of child sex crimes and cover-ups,

since "virtually all of them tend to be secretive."

It's easier to "track" pedophile priests, said Clohessy, because of an official Catholic directory published every year with assignments for most clergy. But over time, he said, bishops are getting "smarter" about concealing the reasons why a child-molesting cleric was moved or simply left out of the directory.

"Many predators do seek out jobs with little supervision and where they'll have access to, and authority over, children," said Clohessy, an abuse survivor who testified before the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002. "Being able to claim religious status is a bonus."

Amy Smith, a SNAP representative in Houston, said the Southern Baptist Convention has a long history of ignoring abuse and enabling perpetrators by "continuing to elevate and place them in public positions of leadership and trust."

"Predators are master manipulators and use these positions of trust, particularly spiritual trust, to groom kids and gain the trust of parents, preying upon the vulnerable," Smith said.

In her own experience of exposing decades-old abuse that resulted in former Southern Baptist music minister John Langworthy pleading guilty in January to five felony counts in Jackson, Mississippi, Smith said she was rejected by her own parents and chastised by a pastor in her church.

"It is the light of truth and knowledge that is our greatest tool to protect kids," Smith said. "Silence and secrecy only help child predators. It is past time for evangelicals to open their eyes to see the evil within their midst."

Tchividjian said abuse is most prevalent in mission agencies, which often don't report abuse because they fear being barred from working in foreign countries.

The SBC International Mission Board acknowledged in 1995 that their record is "not without blemish" after alleged victims came forward with information about abuse by a longtime missionary to Indonesia that occurred between 1967 and 1973.

A formal complaint in 1973 accused the missionary of fondling two children, but after review, according to a Baptist

Press report in 2002, "the matter was resolved among the parties."

Tchividjian recently launched an online petition calling for greater transparency about sexual abuse occurring in evangelical churches. The July 17 Public Statement Concerning Sexual Abuse in the Church of Jesus Christ was prompted in part by a couple of high-profile Southern Baptist leaders' defense of a ministry colleague accused in a lawsuit of covering up physical and sexual abuse of kids in what has been called the largest evangelical sex-abuse scandal to date.

A resolution on the sexual abuse of children passed at the 2013 Southern Baptist Convention in June was amended on the floor to urge denominational leaders and employees "to utilize the highest sense of discernment in affiliation with groups and/or individuals" that have questionable policies or practices to safeguard children from sexual abuse.
—Bob Allen, ABP

Supreme Court poised to turn right in 2013 term

After two blockbuster terms in which it saved President Obama's health-care law and advanced the cause of same-sex marriage, the Supreme Court appears poised to tack to the right in its upcoming term on a range of social issues, from abortion and contraception to race and prayer.

The justices, whose term began on October 9, could rule against racial minorities in two cases and abortion rights in one or two others. They also could uphold prayers at government meetings, ease restrictions on wealthy political donors, strike down federal environmental regulations and take a first bite out of the Affordable Care Act.

The court also may be ready to restrict the power of the federal government and stand up for states and municipalities in several cases, furthering their defense of federalism.

"They don't defer to the other branches. They don't seem to care about precedents," said Stephen Wermiel, a

constitutional law professor at American University Washington College of Law. The justices, he says, are “more than willing to step up to the plate.”

That was evident in June, when the court on successive days struck down the most important sections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, over the objections of President Obama and congressional Democrats, and the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996, over the objections of Republicans.

“You could not have less deference to a legislative institution,” said David Salmons, an appellate lawyer who has argued 14 cases before the high court. “This is a court that’s very comfortable in exercising its power.”

Conservative interest groups, perhaps seeing their best chance in years to advance their causes, have argued aggressively in their briefs to the court not only for favorable rulings but for overturning some of the court’s time-honored precedents: a 37-year-old campaign finance decision, a 31-year-old ruling on racial integration, even a 93-year-old opinion allowing the federal government to supersede state laws when implementing international treaties.

“They think they have the wind at their back,” says Pamela Harris, a former Justice Department lawyer now teaching at Georgetown University Law Center.

Most of the high-profile cases on the docket fall into one of two categories: lower courts sided either with liberal activists or with federal agencies. They include:

- A challenge to the Federal Election Commission’s limit on how much donors can contribute over two years to candidates, parties and political action committees. It comes from a Republican businessman, Shaun McCutcheon, who wants to exceed the current \$123,200 cap.

- A defense by Michigan’s Republican attorney general of the state’s 2006 constitutional amendment banning affirmative action policies at state universities. If the justices reverse the lower court’s decision, it could bolster such bans in other states, including California.

- The Greece, New York, town board’s defense of its policy allowing local clergy to deliver prayers at town

board meetings. The lower court sided with two women who argued that the predominance of Christian clergy and prayers is coercive.

- A challenge by abortion opponents to a Massachusetts law setting up 35-foot buffer zones around reproductive health clinics that perform abortions. The lower court dismissed what it labeled arguments “old and new, some of which are couched in a creative recalibration of First Amendment principles.”

- A defense by Oklahoma Republican officials of a state law that has the effect of blocking most medical abortions. The law bans off-label uses of drugs that end pregnancies, including RU-486, even though doctors routinely prescribe the drugs that way.

The court also is likely to choose from among dozens of challenges to the new health-care law’s requirement that employers include contraceptive services in preventive health insurance plans. In that case, lower courts have ruled both ways, and the government is among those seeking the high court’s review—but conservatives have the most to gain.

“The court will get another shot at the Affordable Care Act,” says Paul Clement, a former solicitor general under George W. Bush and the nation’s premier Supreme Court litigant. Clement represented states challenging the law in the historic 2012 case.

The medical abortion case probably won’t be the last effort to push the justices into further limits on abortion rights. More cases are in the pipeline, including state laws banning abortions after 20 weeks, mandating ultrasound tests and imposing new restrictions on abortion clinics.

Even the landmark cases most recently decided on same-sex marriage, voting rights and affirmative action could get encores at the high court in the near future. The lawyers who defeated California’s Proposition 8 ban on gay marriage joined a Virginia case that seeks to legalize the practice there.

Such cases, says Tom Goldstein, publisher of *Scotusblog.com* and a frequent Supreme Court litigant, are “making their way to the Supreme Court like a rocket ship, or a series of rocket ships.”

—Richard Wolf, *USA Today*

Anglican female bishop unanimous pick in India

A Christian nun who became the first woman bishop of South Asia’s Anglican community said that so far her appointment has silenced critics who believe only men can play leadership roles in the church.

Speaking on the phone from the Nandyal Diocese in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, Eggoni Pushpalalitha, who was appointed a bishop of the Church of South India on September 30, said she faced bias against women in leadership roles “but only until my consecration.”

“Those who used to talk about it are now touching my feet,” said the 57-year-old bishop, who holds degrees in economics and divinity, referring to an Indian custom of showing respect.

A day before her consecration, she told an Indian newspaper: “Be it any institution, women are always given second-rung treatment. We need to change that by promoting values that teach us to not discriminate and treat all humans the same.”

The Church of South India, successor of the Church of England in India, has been ordaining women as priests since 1976.

The denomination has nearly 4.3 million members in India and Sri Lanka. The CSI is a union of varying traditions, including Anglican, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian and Reformed.

Three other candidates, all men, were also in the running for bishop.
—Vishal Arora, RNS



Eggoni Pushpalalitha

RNS / COURTESY EGgoni PUSHPALALITHA

LIVING BY The Word

All Saints' Sunday, November 3

Luke 6:20–31

THEY ARE OVERHEAD even now, making a racket as they chant *Texas, Texas, Texas*. The high cold air brushes the tips of their wings. It's not a journey to make alone, so they stay in formation, each taking a turn as leader, honking encouragement to the leader, or drafting on the uplift created by the bird ahead. If one falls out of formation, it soon discovers the difficulty of flying without that help. They have so far to go, they need every advantage.

And it's time to go. Even a caged goose knows when it's time and will hop around the cage. Migratory birds fly astounding distances—demoiselle cranes fly over the Himalayas, Arctic terns fly from pole to pole. Snow geese fly from their breeding grounds on Baffin Island, above the Arctic Circle, to Eagle Lake, Texas, carrying within them a powerful sense of home.

No one has to explain to a goose about the cold or the miles or the hardship. It knows all about weal and woe.

When William Fiennes was a boy in England, he read Paul Gallico's haunting story "The Snow Goose." Perhaps because his father was a bird watcher, the story left a lasting impression. In his twenties, William suffered a severe illness that hospitalized him for three months. During the long convalescence, he dreamt of escape, adventure, of flying with the geese to the Arctic. William had never seen a snow goose.

Once he was well enough to go, he set out on a quest to follow the geese on their 3,000-mile journey from Texas to Nebraska's Platte River valley, to the lakes of the Dakotas, to grain fields west of Winnipeg, to Hudson Bay, then to Baffin Island. He arrived in Aberdeen, South Dakota, the same day as 340,000 geese. The sound was deafening, as if their wing beats and calls were being hammered out on anvils.

If we've spent too much time indoors, we may not be able to properly appreciate the reading of the blessings and woes as given in Luke. We're more comfortable with the Beatitudes in Matthew. But as Jesus said, it rains on the just and the unjust. The God of the Hebrew Bible declares, "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things" (Isa. 45:7). We are not so different from our fellow creatures, and All Saints' Sunday tells us that we too can survive hardship.

All Saints' is a time of mixed emotions—a time of grief and gratitude, of blessing and woe. We can imagine standing beside the disciples on a broad plain, surrounded by a vast throng, wondering what will come next. Like them, we are ordinary

people, prone to foolishness—stubbornly earthbound creatures. If we travel with Jesus we are going to see even greater extremes than we have known before. So it's reassuring when he emphasizes the blessings. "Blessed are you who weep now," he says. But we will have to venture a long way into places we haven't seen before.

This is the time of year that many retirees from northern Michigan, who call themselves "snowbirds," begin making their way to warmer climes. They have aches and pains and are well accustomed to loss. Every year they lose a friend or family member. It's just a fact, and it doesn't help to brood about it.

I got a call from an older friend who was on his way to Bradenton, Florida. He hates to fly—he feels more in control driving his own car. Except that on this trip he wrecked his car on the Blue Ridge Parkway. "Damn foolishness," he says. "I was trying to turn off at one of those little rest stops, you know, where they have these little entrances . . ." At least he still continued on to Bradenton, where he looked forward to seeing his church friends. "We're all safer when we get there," he says. "This is the time when we make everybody nervous."

As William Fiennes followed the geese across North America, he became nostalgic for his own boyhood home. At last the flock reached Baffin Island, above the Arctic Circle, where it was endless day. The geese have a wide habitat for nesting, with no predators, and they can feed 24 hours a day in sunlight.

Sharing the journey with them had been a sort of religious experience for William. He found human company way up there, a community of native Inuit people who live in prefab wooden homes with tiny windows and sealskins drying on their porches—and a nearby church shaped like an igloo. Natsiq and Paula, his hosts, volunteered to take him out on the tundra in their snowmobiles. They wore parkas stuffed with the down of snow geese. And on the frozen plain, surrounded by the birds, Natsiq and Paula urged him to join in a bowl of goose soup. It was like a kind of communion: "The meat was rich," he says. "You could taste the miles in it."

There were snow geese all around him: snow geese on the frozen plains, snow geese in the parka he wore, snow geese inside of him.

Men and women with snow-white hair are also getting where they need to go and finding the company and the home that they need. All of us on this All Saints' Sunday can be conscious of the loved ones around us, outside and inside us. When we think of them, it may be hard to say whether home is up there or down here. This is true whether we mount up with wings like eagles or on something decidedly more modest.

Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, November 10

Job 19:23–27a

WHEN I WAS a new pastor I imagined that I was breaking new ground, doing things differently than older colleagues. Funerals, for example—folks liked it when funerals were called “celebrations of life” and involved lots of personal stories about the deceased. “Your service was so *personal*,” a friend of the widow might gush. “I’ve been to so many that were *impersonal*.” The likelihood that this personal approach had been around forever, and was trite in its own way, hadn’t yet set in. But an enterprising funeral home director liked what he saw and offered me a spot on his payroll if I would show him how to gather and tell these “personal” stories. Was there a template for it?

Well, yes and no. It was really just about listening. I’d get the family together and let them talk about their loved one, then ask questions chronologically and encourage them to ramble. It took some time to put the stories in order, flesh out the themes, apply a little rouge to the cheeks and present the result.

The funeral director wanted speed. It was his idea that “personal” services would transform the industry when matched with rapid production methods. His staff began using a formula—a few personal details larded with references to the Depression or World War II or the 1960s, and juicy memories of family meals. Eventually he built a franchise. In addition to personalized video tributes, his staff offered decorative attachments for caskets—fishing emblems for fishermen, poker baize for poker players and insert panels celebrating a favorite sports team.

Job wants something else entirely. He doesn’t particularly need a memorial to his hobbies, habits or even his dearest kin, whom he has lost in the most random way. He simply wants an encounter with the living God. He wants to have it out, face-to-face, with the One responsible for his place on earth. If all memory of him is blotted out, so be it—“Let the day perish in which I was born,” he says—as long as his stubborn, bruised faith continues to sing out after he is gone. “O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives . . .”

It is heartbreaking to consider Job’s anguish, the obscurity, the utter annihilation that faces him. Suddenly childless, penniless, bereft even of his wife’s love, he could well wonder if the universe is impersonal. Yet he does not ask to be remembered. He cries out instead for his *praise* to survive.

An iron pen will outlast a mortal man. In ancient times, even though writing instruments were fragile and documents not terribly durable, words still had a greater life expectancy than human beings. Many people since then have put great hopes in literary immortality, or what Vladimir Nabokov called “the secret of durable pigments.” Job’s pen has not only iron but irony—for even though he says he is passing away, both his grief and his praise are imperishable.

Faced with the end of personhood, all of us turn into Job. We may approach religious life as if it were about us, our survival of this world, our way into heaven, our souls in eternity. At the end our loved ones are consumers on our behalf, investing in final memorabilia, pulling together boards of photographs, sports trophies, old service uniforms, needlepoints and even that horrible lamp given as a joke at Christmas.

But Job doesn’t cling to such things. Instead he places himself in the hands of a redeemer. Such a person is able to buy back what another person, usually a family member, has lost. It is a role for someone who above all is willing to listen.

Job has the temerity to imply that his Redeemer is the Almighty God, the maker of heaven and earth. This breathtak-

Job wants his words of grief and praise to be remembered.

ing confidence, faith or effrontery is what redeems Job and makes him so much more than just a figure of pity. He becomes, on the spot, a three-dimensional person.

When the poet John Keats lay dying, he thought that nothing of him would survive. Little of his poetry had been published; at 25 he was being cheated of the opportunity to do more. He asked that his epitaph be: *Here lies one whose name was writ in water*. This epitaph was engraved on a stone that survives in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, and even though his name does not appear on it, he is widely known.

Another man, once just as obscure, has his name written on hearts and minds everywhere. He is known as a Redeemer. On a more personal level he is known for how he listens to us—how at needful times he invites us to tell our stories and even to ramble. Now that I am a not-so-young pastor, I suspect that is all anyone wants, really. There’s no formula to it. It is really just about listening.

The author is Lawrence Wood, who lives in Michigan. His books include News to Me.

What's the text?

by Steve Thorngate

WHENEVER I PLAN a Maundy Thursday service, I get annoyed with the lectionary. Why isn't the second reading 1 John 4? I get that Paul's account of the words of institution for the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians is assigned to cover for the lack of an account in John's Gospel. Still, the day is named for the New Commandment. Jesus, gearing up for the most terrifying experience he and his disciples will ever know, commands them to love one another. It'd be nice if 1 John's gloss—that such love *casts out fear*—also made the cut.

This fairly arbitrary objection may be mine alone. But lots of us worship planners have pet frustrations with the *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992). My Facebook newsfeed—a place much like the wider world, if half the population went to seminary—attests to these regularly.

Why pair these readings? Why skip those verses? How will we survive an entire month on Jesus the long-winded bread of life? Does Christ's appearance to Thomas really need to come up every Low Sunday (leaving young associate ministers—preaching while the senior pastor takes the week off—with thick files of sermons on doubt or woundedness or bodily resurrection)?

Most of all: how could the *RCL* leave *x* out altogether? Lectionary Jesus goes easy on the religious authorities in Matthew; come John, they remember his kindness by not once trying to stone him. The *RCL* silences Zechariah before Gabriel can—leaving only an anonymous Benedictus—while Stephen doesn't turn up until his gallows sermon, a martyr without a ministry. Lectionary James praises good works but demurs from overmuch denunciation of the rich. There's not space here for even a brisk highlight reel of what's missing from the Old Testament.

Even Paul suffers some notable omissions. Take his teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 on the ethics of receiving communion, a relevant word at a time of little consensus on the subject. In the lectionary, all that remains is the aforementioned institutional narrative, extracted to plug a hole on Maundy Thursday.

Yet Maundy Thursday is also a good example of how the *RCL* improved on its predecessors. It added the New Commandment verses to John's footwashing story. Anyone in the pews who actually knows what *maundy* means, and why this Thursday is maundier than any other, has the *RCL* revisions to thank.

The *RCL*, after all, didn't insert itself into a status quo of a rich biblical diet in North American worship. Decades ago, Catholics used a one-year lectionary, and those Protestants

who used a lectionary at all typically employed variations on the Catholic one. Many churches rarely cracked open the Old Testament.

Then came the Vatican II reforms and the *Ordo Lectionum Missae* (1969). This Roman lectionary established the now familiar pattern: three weekly readings plus a psalm, with a different synoptic Gospel the main focus in each of three years. Protestant churches took notice and soon adapted the *OLM* to

The *Year D* project began with a desire to include psalms of lament in worship.

their own needs, resulting in several lectionaries with minor differences. In 1978, the Consultation on Common Texts—formed after Vatican II to develop English liturgical texts for ecumenical use—turned to the task of harmonizing these into one.

The CCT lectionary committee was also charged with revising the *OLM*'s OT lections—chosen to echo the Gospel readings—in favor of a less typological approach. It accomplished this by treating the first readings in Ordinary Time much as the *OLM* already treated the second: as an independent, semicontinuous stream. This was the major innovation of the *Common Lectionary* (1983), which Taylor Burton-Edwards of the CCT characterizes as a “first draft.” The plan was always to solicit feedback and produce a revision.

Among other things, the *RCL* added a lot of important texts: the wages of sin, the day of salvation, the tree of life, the nontaming of the tongue. The lectionary Herods—once practically nonviolent—now slaughter the Holy Innocents and execute John. And there are many more women mentioned, especially in the OT selections.

The *RCL* has lots of space for OT texts, because its biggest revision was to include two separate OT tracks during Ordinary Time: one complementary (like the *OLM*), one semicontinuous (like the *CL*). This development and the subsequent popularity of the complementary track might be seen as a setback for the *CL*'s antitypological aims. But Burton-Edwards—who is also the United Methodists' director of worship resources—views such flexibility as all upside, noting that

“there has historically been much wider divergence” during Ordinary Time than elsewhere.

And even within each OT track, the *RCL* offers improvements. For instance, it retains the *CL*’s Davidic sequence but introduces Goliath, Saul, Solomon and the adult Samuel. Still generally omitted: David’s ambiguous relationship with Jonathan. The 20th anniversary edition of the *RCL* (2012), which details the above history, also explains some omissions. With Jonathan, the CCT was concerned about subjecting such a story to the first reading’s common fate—read aloud, never mentioned again—so it added it as an *optional* lection, subbed in at the preacher’s discretion.

Of course, for most of us, it’s all optional. Local control over worship is the Protestant norm. And in recent years, several people have offered alternatives.

Timothy Slemmons thinks the *RCL* is pretty good as far as it goes—which isn’t far enough. Slemmons, who teaches homiletics and worship at Dubuque Theological Seminary, appreciates that the *RCL* expanded the American pulpit’s canon. He’d like more such expansion. In his book *Year D* (2012), he offers an impressive start: a cohesive and expansive fourth year of lections.

The seed for *Year D* was planted when Slemmons studied with Walter Brueggemann, whose emphasis on the lament psalms inspired Slemmons to compile the *RCL*’s omitted psalms and distribute them to his classmates as “The Psalter of the Disappeared.” Besides including these psalms, *Year D* introduces missing OT books to the cycle—and gathers up most remaining NT passages, excluding only synoptic parallels and parts of Acts and Revelation. Taking the *RCL*’s three years as given, Slemmons builds a fourth year out of what’s left.

Slemmons’s guiding principle is that worship texts should be chosen from the whole canon. But his point isn’t that all canonical texts are by definition equally suitable. It’s that local leaders should discern this question for themselves. Slemmons insists that “if a text is canonical, it deserves a hearing”—in the preacher’s study, if not necessarily in the pulpit. Yet “preachers often defer to the lectionary, with little thought to what is missing from the church’s diet.”

Year D encourages local picking and choosing by assigning up to nine readings for a given day. Here Slemmons is motivated partly by the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which both calls for texts to be drawn from the entire canon and charges ministers with seeing that it’s done. He’s thinking practically about context, too: “Some community somewhere is bound to find new use in worship for texts previously deemed unsuitable,” even if others appreciate having alternatives when the weird stuff comes up.

Slemmons also has specific objections to the *RCL*’s exclusions. Perhaps his biggest beef is that it “tends to stress grace to the frequent exclusion of texts that call for repentance.”

Burton-Edwards counters that it’s the New Testament that prefers grace, not the lectionary.

In any case, Slemmons wants more balance. And because *Year D* packs this corrective into a single year of lections, he worries that it “may be perceived as too hard-going.”



Indeed, there’s a lot of law here. But worship planners may be more startled by some of *Year D*’s unlikelier assignments. Slemmons offers Gospel texts from Jesus’ adult ministry for the nativity propers; on Easter it’s the resurrection of the dead discourse from John 5. Of course, Slemmons’s whole point is to bring in texts not otherwise assigned. He also favors semi-continuous readings over the calendar’s topical demands. It’s easier to appreciate all this in theory, however, than it is to imagine focusing on the adulterous woman story on Maundy Thursday—simply because, as *Year D* explains, it’s “the last remaining unused text from the middle chapters of John assigned to Lent.”

Year D does offer compelling arguments for some of these choices. But it still feels like the preacher is being handed a stacked theological deck, a particular take on a central story in place of the story itself. Slemmons argues that a lectionary is always doing theology when it matches text to occasion. Still, many preachers feel that their primary task on a high holy day is simply to tell the story, and *Year D*’s lections don’t help here.

Besides, it’s one thing to interpret a holiday through a particular text based on tradition or consensus. It’s quite another to do it because one guy says so. While Slemmons’s work is deeply informed by conversations with colleagues, it’s fundamentally his. He allows that this is a fair criticism—of his OT selections. But *Year D* uses all remaining psalms, epistle texts and unparalleled Gospel material. Here Slemmons makes the good point that “we have the benefit of an objective norm”: the canon itself.

Promoting the canon as the norm—not arranging lections—is Slemmons’s main project. He feels an urgency about this, because “the church today is like a body depleted of essential nutrients.” His goal is to recover “the sense of expectancy with which we should approach even the most seemingly irrelevant text.”

To be sure, Slemmons also hopes that more churches will use *Year D* as he's arranged it. The book includes helpful strategies for implementing it with minimal disruption, and Slemmons's current project is a series of resources built around Years A through D. He's also encouraged by similar fourth-year proposals elsewhere (see sidebar).

Slemmons hopes for an eventual seven-year lectionary. This could greatly increase the amount of scripture proclaimed in worship. But how much would be heard? The *RCL* expanded the pulpit's canon, but this has hardly led to stronger biblical literacy among the laity. What would?

If *Year D* is about attending to every word from the mouth of God, the Narrative Lectionary is about understanding those words that are proclaimed. The decline of biblical literacy is a complex cultural problem, not the fault of any lectionary, but Rolf Jacobson and Craig Koester, who started the NL in 2010, are convinced that the *RCL* isn't helping.

"The *RCL* includes a wide range of texts," allows Koester, who teaches New Testament at Luther Seminary. "But it does not foster a sense of movement." The NL's priority is not inclusion but sequence—it seeks "a coherent sense of the whole."

Churchgoers "have grown used to not understanding the public reading of scripture," adds Jacobson, Koester's colleague in Old Testament. "So they don't complain, and worship leaders do not realize how little congregants grasp the overarching story." Especially with OT lections determined by Gospel themes, "listeners are given basically no context"—because "the *RCL* intentionally reads the biblical story out of narrative order."

Of course, the *RCL*'s semicontinuous track avoids this issue during Ordinary Time (also known as most of the year). But

Jacobson points also to rearranged Gospel passages, such as the synoptic sequence of John's appearance, Jesus' baptism and the temptation. The *RCL* spreads these across three different seasons.

Koester highlights the apocalyptic material in Mark 13. In Mark this material points to Jesus' imminent death, but the *RCL* assigns it to Advent and just before. Koester recognizes that this move serves the movement of the liturgical year, which "begins with the anticipation of Jesus' birth and culminates with the anticipation of his coming again. But the story of Jesus belongs within a much larger story that stretches from the creation."

Churchgoers may not grasp the Bible's overall story.

Burton-Edwards maintains that "the calendar closely attends to" this larger story. But if so it does this via multiple, simultaneous tracks—not the most accessible pattern for the biblically illiterate. According to Burton-Edwards, the *RCL* assumes a slightly higher standard—that "a good number of [congregants] may have participated in some kind of class involving the Bible, or read it themselves." And he stresses that "worship cannot and should not be expected to carry the entire burden."

Yet the burden is often simply dropped. So the NL starts over from scratch, taking narrative sequence as its norm. Jacobson recounts that he "wondered out loud" at a synod assembly why churches don't "preach the OT in big brush strokes from Labor Day through Christmas, preach one Gospel from Christmas through Easter, and preach early church stories and Acts until Pentecost." After my talk, a pastor came up and said, "I have just talked 11 other congregations into doing it." Word spread, and several hundred congregations recently participated in the NL's third year.

The NL's accessibility is appealing. Each week it focuses on a single text, so churchgoers are asked to follow just one ongoing story. According to Koester, this also "allows the OT, Acts and Paul's letters to function as word of God more clearly, since they are not simply a preface to the Gospel."

Koester and Jacobson initially conceived of the NL as a nine-month experiment. They now offer a four-year cycle—a year per Gospel—with discrete series options for the summer. They call these series the Unnarrative Lectionary, because they mitigate what Jacobson acknowledges is a downside: the NL's relative "lack of attention to non-narrative texts."

Another objection is that one risks missing the OT trees for the forest. Each fall the NL leaps from highlight to highlight, covering the same characters each year but via a different reading. "The goal is to expose people to preaching on the major stories," explains Jacobson, in a way that "reinforces the importance of the biblical story."

But does a different David lection each October reinforce *David's* story? The *RCL* gives him ten consecutive weeks. Of course, *RCL* preachers are liable to ignore this. By assigning a single text, the NL overthrows the homiletical tyranny of the Gospels. From Labor Day until just before Christmas, it's the OT.

"Travel light"

Command or description, I want
to glow as I walk through my day,

as I glide through the halls
of the nursing home where I find you

dozing in your bed. I want you
to see how I'm learning to float,

the air thinning between our kisses.
And yet, the weight—harvest of moon

and fruit heavy with sugar. In August
heat I lift a melon, smell this long

summer pressed against the earth,
what I will carry to you tomorrow,

offering slices of remembrance.

Jean Janzen

Advent, then, focuses on the prophets. That's a common angle but not the only one—the NL's approach opens some doors but closes others. It schedules the Magi on or right after Christmas Day. But 12 days of Christmas is a valuable tradition—and not just for the opportunity to explain the song. In Mark's year, NL Jesus goes from the manger (on loan from Luke) immediately to adulthood—because the Roadrunner Gospel, not the church year, sets the pace.

And something is surely lost—homiletically as well as liturgically—by having only one reading. As Jacobson observes, the *RCL*'s thematic connections can be thin. They're even thinner when the readings aren't meant to be complementary and preachers find connections anyway. Yet elsewhere the connections are rich, and the fact that preaching on multiple texts is sometimes done poorly isn't a reason not to do it well.

Actually, the NL does assign two readings: shorter Gospel lections were added last year to complement the OT and epistle readings. These are optional "accompanying readings," not preaching texts. They're a response to requests from Episcopalians, for whom a Eucharist without a Gospel reading was a bridge too far. The addition was well received, and this

year the NL made a similar move with the Gospel preaching texts, adding accompanying readings from the psalms.

Such feedback has shaped the NL throughout its short life. (The summer series came about this way, too.) Koester says the NL has benefited from an "ongoing sense of collaboration"—and much affirmation. Preachers appreciate being nudged out of the Gospels. Sunday school teachers find it easier to connect curriculum with worship. Congregations report growth in faith and understanding. Meanwhile, NL-based resources are steadily growing.

The NL makes a good case for starting with the overall biblical narrative and prioritizing formation. But as we've already seen, there are other starting points, narratives and priorities. The African American Lectionary raises these good questions: Whose formation, and in what story?

The AAL took shape in 2007, when Martha Simmons received a Lilly grant and commissioned colleagues to help create a new lectionary. Cain Hope Felder, James Abbington and Mitzi Smith formed a planning team to work with Simmons, president and publisher of *The African American Pulpit*. They wanted to "ground the project in African American religious, liturgical and cultural history."

4 OPTIONS FOR ADVENT 2013

	December 1 [Advent 1]	December 8 [Advent 2]	December 15 [Advent 3]	December 22 [Advent 4]
REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY (YEAR A)	Isaiah 2:1–5 (Swords into plowshares) Psalm 122 Romans 13:11–14 (The moment to awake) Matthew 26:36–44 (The Son of Man returns)	Isaiah 11:1–10 (A branch from Jesse's root) Psalm 72 Romans 15:4–13 (Hope for the Gentiles) Matthew 3:1–12 (John preaches & baptizes)	Isaiah 35:1–10 (Streams in the desert) Psalm 146:5–10 or Luke 1:46b–55 (The song of Mary) James 5:7–10 (Patiently await God's coming) Matthew 11:2–11 (John is Jesus' messenger)	Isaiah 7:10–16 (The young woman is with child) Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 Romans 1:1–7 (The gospel promised through the prophets) Matthew 1:18–25 (The angel appears to Joseph)
YEAR D	Malachi 1:1–14 (God's name is great among the nations) Psalm 18 Luke 1:1–25 (Zechariah and Elizabeth) Hebrews 1:13–2:4 (Do not neglect so great a salvation)	Numbers 12 (Miriam and Aaron turn against Moses) or Numbers 20:1–13 (14–21) 22–29 (Death of Aaron) Psalm 106:1 7–18, 24–28 (43–48) or Psalm 95 Luke 1:57 58–67 (68–79) 80 (John's birth and Zechariah's praise) Hebrews 3:1–19 (Moses' faithfulness)	Joshua 23:1–16 (Joshua's farewell address) Psalm 81:1 2–9 (10–16) or Psalm 95 Luke 3:23–38 (Genealogy of Jesus/Joseph) Hebrews 4:1–11 (12–16) (Enter God's rest)	Numbers 14:1–25 (Joshua addresses the complaining Israelites) Psalm 144 John 3:22–28 (John is messenger, not Messiah) Hebrews 5:11–6:20 (The hope set before us)
THE NARRATIVE LECTIONARY (YEAR 4)	Preaching text: Daniel 3:1, 8–30 (The fiery furnace) Accompanying text: John 18:36–37 (Jesus and Pilate discuss kingship)	Preaching text: Ezekiel 37:1–14 (Dry bones) Accompanying text: John 11:25–26 (The resurrection and the life)	Preaching text: Isaiah 55:1–11 (Come to the waters) Accompanying text: John 4:13–14 (Living water)	Preaching text: John 1:1–18 (The Word became flesh) Accompanying text: Psalm 130:5–8
AFRICAN AMERICAN LECTIONARY (YEAR 6)	Advent 1 / World AIDS Day: Isaiah 59:14–16 (Injustice displeases God)	Advent 2 (Peace): Psalm 85 (Righteousness and peace will kiss each other)	Advent 3 (Joy): Isaiah 9:6–7 (A child has been born for us)	Advent 4 (Love): Luke 1:46–55 (The song of Mary)

The AAL is not dictated by the liturgical calendar shared by what its materials call “historically hierarchical faith communities.” It offers a different calendar, one that includes the major holidays but as part of a cycle of prevailing black church observances such as Women’s Day, Men’s Day and Watch Night. Each week has a theme. While most themes codify existing practice, Simmons estimates that 30 percent reflect “practices that the lectionary team came up with due to the needs of congregations.” These change somewhat each year. Additions for 2013 include Restoring the Peace/Community Action Day, Caregivers Sunday and LGBT Sunday.

Grounding the project in African-American history also means that maximal biblical exposure isn’t the goal. “For more than 100 years, it was illegal in many states for African Americans to learn to read,” explains Simmons. “This did not anchor the reading of the Bible in our faith communities”—and today “every faith community is reading the Bible less and less.” While reading more Bible is important, “even more, we want [people] to fully understand whatever they read.”

The AAL follows the common black-church pattern of a single weekly reading. And even this is framed as more suggestion than assignment. “Our aim,” says Simmons, “is not to

get all preachers to use the same scriptures” but “to get them to discuss the same issues.” The themes are the main point, and the AAL offers a rich array of resources to support them—text-specific commentaries but also thematic liturgical, musical and cultural-historical materials by leading practitioners and scholars.

The fact that the AAL is designed by and for African-American Christians is only the most obvious of its differences from *Year D* and the NL. It’s also deeply collaborative—a priority with Simmons, who appreciates the varied voices sharpened through dialogue. But “sometimes the views are so different, consensus is difficult” on a given issue—and Simmons recognizes that, rightly or wrongly, consensus views are often exactly what pastors are looking for.

Another difference: the AAL is clearly a tool for worship, not just or even mostly for preaching, so its offerings go far beyond sermon prep. The same is true of the *RCL* and its less centralized constellation of resources. But while the creators of *Year D* and the NL wouldn’t claim that a lectionary is exclusively about preaching, it’s primarily the pulpit they have in mind.

Of course, *Year D* and the NL are essentially just tables of readings, the creators of which would be thrilled to see a grant-funded panoply of additional resources. The AAL is much broader, parallel in scope not just to the *RCL* but also to the calendar it follows and the materials that follow it. You could say the AAL isn’t exactly a lectionary; you could also say that developing a calendar, lectionary and resources as one cohesive project is pretty much the ideal way to do it.

For all its uniqueness, the AAL echoes other lectionary projects, too. It



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begins with a calendar and themes and follows with lections; so does much of the *RCL*. Like the NL, the AAL is more interested in people understanding the Bible than hearing all of it. And both the AAL and *Year D* emphasize context and local choice.

The AAL's reception "has exceeded what I imagined," says Simmons—among both nonlectionary churches and *RCL* churches. The latter have mostly reported using the AAL's resources with the *RCL*'s lections, creating a sort of hybrid that speaks to multiple narratives and traditions.

Eric Lemonholm is enthusiastic about such mash-ups. The Lutheran pastor's 2011 D.Min. thesis at Luther, which he turned into *The Open-Source Lectionary*, calls for a more fluid approach to lectionary use. Lemonholm embraces the *RCL* for its broad ecumenical reach and the "feeling of solidarity" its use instills. His criticism echoes others: "missing and disconnected texts."

Lemonholm's most striking example is "love your enemies." The *RCL* actually assigns both Matthew's version of that text and Luke's. But in both cases it's slated for the seventh Sunday after Epiphany, one of the Ordinary cycle's odd benchwarming weeks—used only when the liturgical calendar's stars align. Week seven didn't make it into the Year A or C calendar between 2001 and 2011. "A ten-year absence of Jesus' command to love our enemies occurred," says Lemonholm, "during the first ten years of the war on terror."

Another complaint, one common among *RCL* critics: John's exclusion from the Gospel-a-year club. Of course, the fourth Gospel is well represented in the *RCL*; it even gets read semi-continuously for a couple of stretches. And the CCT has detailed its reasons for avoiding a John year, including the precedent set by the Roman lectionary and the history of anti-Semitic interpretation. Also, there's the difficulty of carving pericopes from so much monological gabfest. "Personally," says the CCT's Burton-Edwards, "I think a whole year of [John] would likely be overwhelming."

Lemonholm tried half a year. Last year, his church—the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Rockford, Illinois—benched Mark from Advent through Eastertide and read John instead, with good results, he says. He addressed another concern, the *RCL*'s patchy journey through Revelation, by expanding it into a fuller series. Lemonholm tries to balance a commitment to the *RCL* with attention to context, to his congregation's "hunger for going deeper."

Along with a John year, *The Open-Source Lectionary* proposes a more flexible, modular approach to the non-Gospel readings—the better to support locally chosen series. Lemonholm's website offers several examples. "With the widespread use of online resources," he says, "lectionaries do not need to be set in stone" as the *RCL* appears to be. This summer, Lemonholm used an NL series.

"Moving forward, we will have multiple lectionaries," he

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“Beginning at that fertile eucharistic center, there’s no end to what Christians can learn, explore and enjoy.”



Rodney Clapp’s books include *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, Not Angels* and *Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction*.

Rodney Clapp writes American Soundings for the *Christian Century*.

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says. “We will need to be flexible and wise in our choice.”

Will alternate lectionaries grow and their use expand? If so, the gains could mean a loss for the whole notion of a common lectionary.

But what if what grows is the sort of intentional yet flexible *RCL* use that Lemonholm favors, systematized by well-constructed alternatives? Churches that don’t follow the *RCL* rigidly sometimes follow it carelessly. They jump haphazardly between tracks; they go briefly “off lectionary” with little attention to what’s disrupted; they skip the first reading but faithfully sing its companion psalm. Worship planning hours are, of course, limited. So choosing from a whole folder of well-tested options could be a big improvement on choosing between the *RCL* and whatever you can come up with on the fly.

Or maybe the CCT will undertake another revision. No such plans currently exist, says Burton-Edwards. “Given continued growth worldwide in the reception and use of the *RCL*, we see our energies being better spent on making it even more useful” via publications and support for new contexts. Still, “when a critical mass . . . call[s] for a major revision,” the CCT “would very likely offer [its] services.” Such an *NRCL* might not include a fourth year, John’s or otherwise. But it would no doubt attend to other criticisms, including finding ways to include new texts.

Perhaps it could even move toward a more modular approach to the non-Gospel readings, as Lemonholm outlines. Such an approach would be a continuation, not a departure; the *RCL* already does some of this during Ordinary Time. And it’s easy to imagine a new lectionary generating mostly digital resources—enabling it to continually adapt, to be not revised but revising. Burton-Edwards allows that a more fluid lectionary is possible but maintains that there “will always remain considerable value in having a core reference text, arrived at in deep ecumenical collaboration.”

What the CCT wholeheartedly supports, however, is local choice in how best to use the *RCL*. The lectionary is “a starting place,” Burton-Edwards says. “We see the *RCL* truly as our gift and are glad for the churches to use it or leave it aside as best fits their purposes.”

On this point everyone quoted here agrees: a lectionary is not a rigid rule. Maybe the future looks much like the present: an unchanged *RCL*, with relatively marginal alternatives. Some *RCL* churches will follow it strictly; others will depart from it. All would do well to follow or depart with intention and care—and one good way of departing is to try another lectionary. The *RCL* is indeed a tremendous gift. So is being charged with planning for our own communities how best to proclaim the Bible in worship. **CC**

A WEALTH OF LECTIONARIES

The Consultation on Common Texts recently released a 20th anniversary edition of the *Revised Common Lectionary* (Fortress, 2012), which includes annotations, historical materials and indexes. A separate daily lectionary, *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings*, was published by Fortress in 2006. The *RCL* is also available at the CCT’s website commontexts.org, among other places.

The Roman *Ordo Lectionum Missae* was revised in 1981 and then translated into various languages. The current English-language version for U.S. use came out in 1998 (various publishers); it is available online from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at usccb.org.

The *Narrative Lectionary*’s four years are available at Luther Seminary’s Working Preacher site, along with commentaries and basic worship resources: workingpreacher.org/narrative_lectionary.aspx.

The *African American Lectionary* website will soon begin posting its seventh year of materials. These include thematic calendars, commentaries and extensive resources for worship planning: theafricanamericanlectionary.org.

Some of *The Open-Source Lectionary* materials are at opensourcelectionary.com. The complete project is available as a self-published book (*The Open Source Lectionary: Preaching Outside the Box*, CreateSpace, 2011).

Year D’s lections and introductory materials are posted at theyearproject.blogspot.com. Annotations and additional materials are in *Year D: A Quadrennial Supplement to the Revised Common Lectionary* (Cascade, 2012). A volume of liturgical resources, also by Timothy Matthew Slemmons, is forthcoming from Cascade.

The *Joint Liturgical Group* is a British parallel to the Consultation on Common Texts. In 1967 it put out a two-year lectionary—with readings following from weekly themes—that was adopted widely in the U.K. (*The Calendar and Lectionary*, Oxford University Press, 1967). In 1990 it produced a major revision generally known as JLG-2, a four-year lectionary that adopted the *Ordo Lectionum Missae* and the *Common Lectionary*’s general approach and added a John year (*A Four-Year Lectionary*, Canterbury, 1990).

The *Uncommon Lectionary* is a two-year lectionary created by Thomas G. Bandy. The first year is the “Seeker Cycle”; the second is the “Disciple Cycle” (*Introducing the Uncommon Lectionary*, Abingdon, 2006).

In *Beyond the Lectionary* (Circle, 2013), UCC pastor David J. Ackerman offers a proposal similar to *Year D*: a fourth year of lections made up of texts the *Revised Common Lectionary* omits. Ackerman also includes commentaries and brief prayers for each week.

Robert Thomas Quisenberry’s D.Min. project at Columbia Theological Seminary is a fourth-year proposal focused specifically on the Old Testament (“Gleanings from the Old Testament for the Modern Christian Pulpit: A Lectionary Year D Focusing on Unused or Forgotten Passages,” 2009).

Steven Odom created a four-year lectionary/*RCL* revision as a D.Min. project at the Graduate Theological Foundation (“Revising the Revised Common Lectionary: A Four-Year Lectionary for Use in the Churches,” 1994).

Pastor Francis

by Lawrence S. Cunningham

LAST SPRING, while the world waited for the successor to Pope Benedict XVI to be announced, a researcher for National Public Radio called me to ask why popes change their name when assuming the papacy. I explained that the custom started in the sixth century when the chosen candidate bore the unfortunate name of Mercury. Since the bishop of Rome could hardly bear the name of a pagan god, the new pope took the name John.

In the course of our chat, I said in passing that it was odd that no pope ever took the name Francis. Perhaps new popes worry that they cannot live up to the model of Il Poverello.

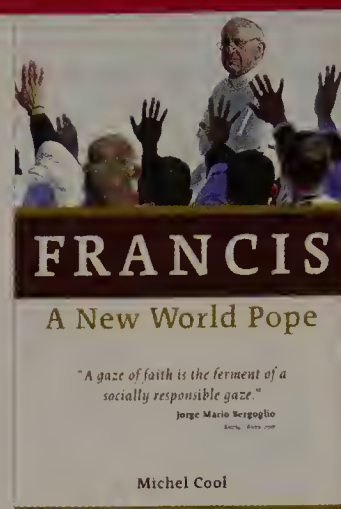
Later that same day, Jorge Bergoglio was elected pope and took the name Francis. When asked to comment on that choice by another news outlet, I could not but recall the old Latin saw: *nomen omen*. Did Pope Francis indeed have in mind the Poor Man of Assisi (who was not even ordained to the priesthood)? Or was he thinking of Francis Xavier, the Jesuit missionary, or perhaps, Francis de Sales, the pastoral bishop and spiritual writer? Rather quickly the new pope made it clear that he had Francis of Assisi in mind.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote that what St. Benedict stored, St. Francis scattered. It was a prophetic phrase. The extroverted Francis succeeded the more monastically inclined scholar-prelate Benedict, thus imperfectly replicating church history.

The biographical facts about the new pope are easily stipulated. Born in 1936 to Italian immigrant parents in Buenos Aires, Bergoglio first planned to become a chemist. After an intense religious experience at the age of 17 (and a bout of tuberculosis that cost him a lung when he was 20), he entered the novitiate of the Jesuits at 22. He studied in Chile and Germany and was ordained to the priesthood 11 years later. In 1973, after a few years in parish work, he was named provincial superior of the Jesuits in Argentina.

His years as provincial coincided with the years (1976–1983) of the ghastly “Dirty War” in Argentina, and although he did not side with the radical Jesuits in those years, he evidently never colluded with the army generals either—which cannot be said of many of the church’s hierarchy.

Bergoglio, however, was not in harmony with the activist slant of the Jesuits of the day and found himself for well over a decade relegated to backwater assignments as a parish priest, teacher and convent chaplain. Then John Paul II named him an auxiliary bishop in 1992, and in 1998 he became archbishop of Buenos Aires and a cardinal in 2001.



Francis: A New World Pope

By Michel Cool

Eerdmans, 128 pp., \$14.00 paperback

Pope Francis: From the End of the Earth to Rome

By the Staff of the Wall Street Journal

WSJ Ebook/Harper Media, \$11.99

As archbishop and as pope Bergoglio has opted for a simple life and made clear his love for the poor. It is easy to render him as a caricature: the simple fool for Christ in contrast to the learned and cultured Mozart-playing Benedict. A closer look at his Argentine life tends to blur that cartoonish view, which was created by the media. Bergoglio’s Jesuit education taught him a deep love of literature (he lists Borges and Dostoevsky as his favorite writers), a thorough training in theology (including a German doctorate, with a thesis on Romano Guardini), a passion for soccer, and an easily expressed appreciation of Argentinian popular culture. While in Buenos Aires he cowrote a book with a prominent rabbi.

By all accounts he was an able administrator with a particular interest in sending priests to serve the poor quarters of his diocese. One could argue that his much touted simplicity of life was a shrewd form of prophetic criticism directed at ills in the church. Commenting on a Gospel parable, he once said that while the Good Shepherd left the 99 to seek the one, the church, by contrast, keeps the one penned up and forgets the 99.

It is far too early to know how Francis will shape the papacy, and the books quickly published about him are mostly cobbled together by relying on Wikipedia, a bit of well trod-Vatican gossip, the standard story about the many problems facing the papacy, and anecdotes about Francis riding the bus and refusing to live in the papal apartments. These two books are no exception.

Hastily translated from the French, Michel Cool’s slapdash volume has a short section of biography, a résumé of ten problems facing the papacy, and a very brief collection of some of the pope’s spoken and written words. It suffers from not saying much about Francis’s career in Argentina.

The editors of the *Wall Street Journal* had the advantage of using onsite reporting from Francis’s native land. Their far more interesting book includes some good pages on Bergoglio and the “Dirty War,” his contentious relationship with the cur-

rent president of Argentina, and a passable reflection on his early education and his development as a Jesuit, enhanced by some interviews with his former colleagues, both clerical and lay. The strengths of this book make us yearn for something even more substantial written by someone with an intimate knowledge of Argentina and the Argentinian church.

While many commentators on the new pope focus on problems internal to the Catholic Church, Francis is emphatic in his desire to keep the church from constantly looking inward. He wants to reach out to the entire world with the Good News. He is acutely aware that this can best be done by using both words and deeds.

In Francis's recently issued encyclical *Lumen Fidei*—which was begun by Benedict as an accompaniment to his letters on hope and charity—Francis notes that many people regard religious faith as “an illusory light, preventing mankind from boldly setting out on the quest for knowledge.” He understands that “our culture has lost a sense of God’s tangible presence and activity in our world.”

Lumen Fidei is a passionate defense of the vigor of religious faith to help us know and to love the living God revealed in scripture. From the vantage point of the papacy, it is the primary task of the pope, as the visible head of the church, to both serve the needs of the church and speak to the larger world.

Francis used many moments in his opening days as pope to underscore his fundamental role as bishop of Rome. It is evidently his intention to exercise his office as a kind of template for the bishops of the world to imitate. In that sense, his ministry as archbishop of Buenos Aires is being continued, with the added responsibility of being the center of Catholic unity. By emphasizing his role as a pastor he subtly demythologizes some of the pretensions of the papacy that have agglutinated to the office from historical pressures brought on by the Counter-Reformation’s exaltation of the papal office.

If we think of Francis’s understanding of the papacy in those terms, his pastoral style becomes more intelligible. He wants to live simply, preach evangelically, touch the poor and marginalized directly and focus his energies on the disaffected because he wants all the bishops in communion with him to do the same. By example he exercises his preaching office for the larger good of the church.

At the same time, as the visible head of the Catholic Church, he faces a myriad of issues with which he must attend and contend. Cool devotes a whole chapter to those problems and challenges, as do the *WSJ* editors. If Benedict was preoccupied with the secularization of Europe, as one would expect a German intellectual to be, Francis, by instinct and background, is acutely aware of the challenges facing the church in the non-European world.

In his homilies in Rio at the World Youth Day, he took account of the challenges presented by the charismatically fueled rise of evangelicals as well as by the yawning gap between the very rich and the desperately poor. He understands the tensions between the official patriotic church in China and the church faithful to Rome. Any prelate even dimly aware of exigent realities understands that the Vatican machinery needs to reform. He is intelligent enough to realize that



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however powerful his own charisma, papal charm will not make these problems disappear.

The unfortunate tendency of slotting people into conservative or liberal pigeonholes shows up in both books, even though more than once Francis has resisted such labels. He frequently notes that the church cannot be reduced to good deeds—it would then simply become an NGO. His own stance starts with a sense of being fully grasped by Christian faith. The logic of Christ, he argues, flows into love. If he has taken St. Francis as his model in loving all of creation and the poor in particular, his training has been in the Jesuit insistence that everything is to be done “for the greater love of God.”

Public reactions to the recent lengthy interview given by Pope Francis to *America* magazine, published in September, followed predictable lines. The progressives were elated by Francis’s words about gays and women; traditionalists were bemused by them. Both parties focused on this or that papal observation.

But taken as a whole, his remarks reveal a person not easily slotted into a box. Anyone who reads the interview carefully will hear a voice that adheres faithfully to the Catholic faith but who insists that Christian pastoral ministry must not, in his words, insist on a “disconnected multitude of doctrines.” He wants the church to insist on the primacy of Christ, from which “other doctrinal or ethical teachings flow.” Francis puts it this way: “The proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives.” What Francis believes is no more audacious than what St. Augustine said centuries ago: “Love God and do what you will.”

Francis has been a pope for about half a year, in which time he has captured the good will and even the love of many. It is far too early to know how he will tackle the challenges facing the Catholic Church in particular and Christianity in general. These two books give us only a halting start in locating him. But they do help us see something that the pope noted in his recent encyclical: to be a person of faith is to “take a stand.” We are beginning to see what stand this pope has taken. CC

Lawrence S. Cunningham is professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame.

Costly hospitality

by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

After an experience in Iraq with Christian Peacemaker Teams, Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove were inspired to minister to strangers. They founded Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina, and over the last decade have welcomed scores of guests—some for a few weeks, others for life.

LEAH AND I move to Durham's Walltown, where we're white outsiders in an African-American community. She takes a job as director of the only after-school program in the neighborhood. It seems like a good way to get to know the neighbors (through their kids, whose defenses often are not as sophisticated). The program is housed in an old elementary school building that a church owns and operates. Leah supervises 40 kids in a fellowship hall for three hours a day. Her job is to feed them, try to get them to do their homework and keep them from killing each other. That last task is not always so easy. One afternoon I lay all 200 pounds of my six-and-a-half-foot frame on a 12-year-old kid until he agrees to let go of a butcher knife.

The entrance to the room where Leah works is directly across from a corner where a few guys in their mid-twenties, dressed in long white T-shirts, stand around for eight to ten hours a day. These guys greet passersby at car windows, making quick exchanges while looking over their shoulders. Leah and I talk about how we might get to know these young men. We're strangers to them and they to us, but we're about the same age.

As we go in and out of the church, they seem to be glaring at us.

We learn that one of them is named Quinton. We find that out because he comes into the church to use the phone. The people who work there seem to know him. He doesn't bother to introduce himself to us, but Leah tries to make small talk. To connect, somehow.

Then one day Quinton says to Leah, "So how come you so stuck up?"

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I mean, how come y'all always passin' us out on the corner and never stop to say, 'What's up?'"

"Well, I didn't know y'all wanted to talk," Leah says. She's dumbstruck by the confrontation and isn't sure how to ask the question that's on her mind. Why does this guy who sells drugs on the corner think he can walk into a church full of kids and use the phone to arrange his deals? Leah and the phone user stare at each other, two strangers with a brick wall between them.

Years later, after Quinton has decided to stop selling

drugs—after he has eaten a couple hundred meals with us and has lived in one of the hospitality houses—he will laugh about all this. We will be together, telling the story over and again to soothe the pain, to begin to heal.

"Man, things was crazy back then." That is how Quinton will characterize those early encounters at the church. What he means is, "I trust you now," which changes everything, because none of us is Superman, leaping over the walls between us in a single bound.

This opening ourselves to one another takes time. But love is a prisoner who stays up night after night with a sharpened toothbrush, working away at a crack in the wall until finally breaking through. A way opens, not over the wall but *through* it. It helps, of course, to have someone working from the other side—to meet you in the middle. But wherever the encounter takes place, this opening in the wall of suspicion and fear finally makes a relationship possible.

This opening is trust.

We move to Walltown knowing that we'll be strangers with white faces, because we know something about the invisible walls that partition southern towns. I was raised 90 miles away in a town that doesn't smell much like the "New South." Driving into Durham from my hometown, we see the welcome sign on the highway that says the city was established in 1869. That's postbellum in southern history—after the war that ripped this land wide open, exposing the hidden wound of our nation's original sin.

Walltown got its name from George Wall, one of many freed slaves who found his way to Durham. Wall did janitorial work for Trinity College, which was later named Duke University. A community grew up around Wall—a tight-knit extended family of other black folks, most of whom also worked on campus. They called the community Walltown.

We learn that there is a storefront on Knox Street called Walltown Neighborhood Ministries. It's an office that's open nine to five, with a receptionist by the door and a steady stream of people coming in and out. Between answering phones and watching the door, the receptionist greets us and makes small talk. We learn

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove recently wrote The Awakening of Hope. This essay is adapted from his latest book, Strangers at My Door, and is published with the permission of Convergent Books, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York. © Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove 2013.



STRANGERS WELCOME: Residents—including author Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (far left) and a community member wounded by a gunshot—relax at Rutba House.

that on the side she designs programs for funeral services. She hands us a sample and invites us to meet director Sylvia Hayes, who is also a minister.

After hearing the schedule of food bank days, neighborhood block parties, community safety meetings and home-ownership seminars, we introduce our idea of opening a hospitality house. We tell Hayes about the Good Samaritans in Rutba, Iraq, who picked up friends of ours after a roadside crash and carried them to a doctor. “Three days ago your country bombed our hospital,” the doctor said. “But we will take care of you.” We want to practice the hospitality we received in Rutba, I say. We want to “go and do likewise.” I realize as I’m saying this that Hayes is the first person in Walltown to hear our hospitality house idea. She cocks her head to the side, her eyes quizzical.

“You mean you want somebody that ain’t got no place to stay to come live with you in your house?” We see that she gets the point—and that she’s never heard anything like this before. Hayes starts to laugh. “OK, when you want to start? I can introduce you to somebody right now.”

Soon Hayes is knocking on the door of a duplex. After a while a short, dark-skinned man named Ronnie answers the door, smiles at the reverend and invites us in. These duplexes are called shotgun houses because the three or four rooms on each side are lined up in a row with a doorway in the middle of each. If all the doors are open, you can stand at the front door and see clear through to the back. All of Ronnie’s belongings are boxed up in a corner; otherwise, the place is empty.

It’s a friend’s place, Ronnie tells us, and he’s been sleeping on a couch in the front room. But his friend was evicted and had moved all the furniture out. She doesn’t know that he’s still

here. Neither does the landlord, apparently. This is why Ronnie was slow to answer the door.

We give our speech about Rutba House. I find myself choosing my words carefully. A quizzical, disbelieving look crosses Ronnie’s face as he listens to our story, but he doesn’t laugh because this isn’t a story about someone else. It’s a story he can be part of, and it’s about a place to sleep tonight. Ronnie starts nodding yes to every question, and we carry his belongings to our car.

In so many ways Ronnie is the ideal guest. He’s conscientious about cleaning up after himself. He helps with household chores. And in the first few weeks he borrows a pair of shoes for an interview and lands a job. Ronnie is all smiles and so are we. This being a hospitality house feels like pure gift.

Then one weekend Leah and I go out of town with Isaac, the only other member of Rutba House at the time. Ronnie stays behind because he has to work. We make sure there’s food in the refrigerator and leave the phone number of the place where we’ll be. Smiling, Ronnie waves good-bye as we drive away in Isaac’s car. He is our brother. We trust him. When we return, Ronnie gives a report on his weekend. It was mostly work and sleep, he says. Ronnie says we’re a blessing.

But when Leah gets in our car on Monday morning to drive to work, she smells cigarette smoke. *Odd*, she thinks, *neither of us smokes*. She has to adjust the driver’s seat and turn the music down. It’s blaring a song she doesn’t know from a CD she’s never seen before.

We talk this over later with Isaac. We feel awful—like we’ve been lied to, like these months of life with Ronnie have all been fake. Maybe we should give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he just assumed we’d be fine with him borrowing the car.

We sit down with Ronnie. Leah walks him through her Monday experience in the car, says we're not angry but need to communicate about things if we're going to share a home. I tell him it makes me feel bad that he took our car without asking. I mention that I'm allergic to cigarette smoke. But I try to emphasize that we want to reconcile, we want to be able to trust him.

His elbows on his knees, Ronnie hangs his head, slowly shaking it back and forth. When we're done talking, he looks up. Ronnie's smile is gone. "I know everything looks like I took your car," he says. "But I didn't. I couldn't stand to live with people if I did something like that."

His words prove to be prophetic. After work the next day he doesn't come home. A couple of days later we call his girlfriend's house to make sure he's OK. "Oh yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine," Ronnie tells us. Then one day when we're gone he comes by to pick up his stuff.

A couple of months later Leah is driving down a street near the house when she sees Ronnie walking the other direction. She blows the horn and waves. He looks but doesn't seem to recognize the car. He keeps walking—all smiles—and we never see him again.

When I was growing up, if my momma didn't trust something that my brother or I said, she'd ask, "Can you look me in the eye and tell me that?" She seemed to know when the fabric of truth that held our world

together was being stretched. My older brother taught me early on that there was no sense lying to her. If you weren't going to do what she said, it was best to go ahead and say so.

After being lied to a dozen times by folks like Ronnie—people with whom I've shared a bathroom—I realize that the frankness that characterized the home I grew up in was based on a basic trust. My momma didn't have any super power. She simply knew her boys, loving us and paying attention to our every need. Beginning in the womb, I suspect, we learned that we were loved, that someone would always take care of us, that there would be enough, that we could trust the universe. But this isn't the case for everyone. It certainly wasn't for Ronnie.

In his study *The Homeless*, social analyst Christopher Jencks looks at the explanations that were offered in the 1980s for the growing numbers of people who were living on the streets of urban America. "Those who end up on the streets have typically had all the disadvantages," he notes. "Most started life in families with a multitude of problems; indeed, many came from families so troubled that they were placed in foster care. Many had serious health and learning problems. A large group grew up in dreadful neighborhoods and attended mediocre schools. After that, most had their share of bad luck in the labor market, the marriage market, or both. It is the cumulative effect of these disadvantages . . . that has left them on the streets." Ronnie's experience never taught him a basic trust. Lying was the habit he learned to get by in a world that has no place for him.

This realization does not make it any easier to be lied to. It does not lend clarity about what to do when you're not sure which parts of a story you can believe. You wish you could be like your momma—you wish you could go back and love from the start, teaching them to trust, asking them, "Can you look me in the eye and say that?" But you can't, because time hasn't healed the wounds of history, and you can't either.

You begin to realize that it must feel awful to be Ronnie. You imagine, for a moment, the fears that must have stirred in Ronnie's soul when he peeked through the blinds of that empty shotgun house and saw your white face, out of place in his neighborhood. You realize that you were the one who came knocking, Ronnie the one who trusted Rev. Hayes enough to open the door, grab his few belongings, get into your car, be your guest.

After you've been at this for awhile, people will sometimes ask whether you're afraid. Eventually you realize that it's people like Ronnie who have every reason to be afraid. It is the stranger who offers you his trust when he comes knocking at the door. And you have the chance to open it, welcoming someone who you know will change you.

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When we meet Gary he is 17, his uniform the baggy jeans and long white tee that all the guys on the corner wear. His is another face in the crowd of those who glare when we pass by. All they know is that we're not customers and our skin is white. Between us stands a wall of misunderstanding, suspicion and fear.

His brother, Ant, is in the Walltown Neighborhood Ministries summer camp. When we learn that it's Ant's 16th birthday we invite him to come by that evening after work. I run to get a tub of the chocolate ice cream Ant likes. Ant is at the house and Gary is with him. Ant has vouched for us. He's told Gary, "Listen, they're all right." Gary has walked through our door not because he trusts us but because he trusts his brother.

Later that summer Ant comes to our house to recover from an appendectomy and ends up staying until he's completed four years of college and has a full-time job. Through Ant we learn that his father killed the boys' mother and dumped her body in a field. We hear about abusive foster families and about orphanages where Gary fought to protect Ant from

Between us stands a wall of misunderstanding and fear.

other kids. Gary seems cursed to wander the earth. He has learned to be a fighter, his defenses always up.

Sometimes Gary comes to a dinner that we serve for any neighbors who want to stop by. He doesn't talk much, but we start to get to know him on his terms—the foods he likes, his peculiar sense of humor. We make pineapple upside-down cake for his birthday because it's his favorite. He smiles a sneaky smile and says, "That's almost good."

Yet he keeps his distance. When we try to talk to him about finishing school or trying to get a job, he changes the subject. Gary is his own man, doing things his own way. He gets picked up by the police on a drug charge and we visit him in jail. We write letters and call out his name at morning prayer. When he gets out we introduce him to a friend who runs a construction crew and he goes to work on a demolition job. But three days into it Gary quits. He says our friend is racist to the core.

We start to notice a pattern that's repeated by dozens of guests and friends from the street. These are people for whom relationships are difficult, people who've been disappointed more times than they can count. Having been rejected on the dance floor of life, they greet an open door or an extended hand with suspicion. They are desperate to connect. They have fantastic, romantic illusions about the wild fun that everyone else must be having. But how can you trust an invitation to join the rest of the world when everything you've experienced suggests there is no place there for you? What if the white guy holding a pineapple upside-down cake is just one more person who's going to let you down?

But what if you're on the other side—what if you're the white guy who's convinced that the gangsters who stand on the corner in white tees are a threat to your children, a plague on your neighborhood, a menace to society? What if, even though you don't want to believe it—even though you left work early to bake

a birthday cake for a young man who wears the white T-shirt—you still feel suspicion? What if you find yourself worrying that guys who carry drugs in their underwear and guns in their belts might do something stupid in your house, around your friends and family? Such a thing is not outside the realm of possibility. You worry because you are not in control, but you do everything in your power not to let it show.

One evening at dinner a couple dozen of us are passing plates of potatoes and greens when the back door opens. Gary walks in with his friend Slug, slouches down in a chair and asks what's for dinner. Only he asks extra slow, his eyelids almost closing before he can finish his sentence. We have a rule at Rutba House: anyone is welcome most any time, but no drugs and no guns allowed. You don't come to dinner high. Everyone knows this. I tell Gary and Slug that I need to talk to them in the living room, that I'm not kidding, that they need to get up. Now.

My blood pressure is up, and I say more than I need to. I'm not just naming a boundary, I'm wielding words like a sword, rallying the troops to defend the castle. Gary and Slug want nothing to do with me. They storm out the front door, cussing my "cracker ass," insisting that I'm making a big deal out of nothing. In their view, I've only confirmed what they already knew: you can't trust white folks.

For months Gary refuses to speak to me, but eventually he starts coming around again. I apologize for being too harsh that night. We engage in the dance: come close, push away, come close, push away. We're trying to learn to trust each other.

Then one spring morning we get a call from a neighbor who says Gary has been shot. We find him at the hospital in the ICU with a gunshot wound to the throat. He is breathing through a tracheotomy, unable to move or speak. He can open his eyes enough to glare at anyone who walks into the room. Gary has survived but is paralyzed. He may regain some use of his arms, but he cannot sit up, stand or walk. He's not likely to ever live independently. He even has to press a button to get a nurse to suction the saliva he can't swallow.

All of this is too much for Gary. He is alive, but he is living in a state of rage. Doctors and nurses are appalled by the way he talks to them when he regains the ability to speak. They call in social workers and psychologists. The hospital administration people call his case one of the most difficult they've ever handled.

Meanwhile, a lieutenant from the local police district assures our neighbors that many of our problems have been resolved because one of Walltown's most notorious criminals has been shot and is paralyzed. The criminal won't be causing any more trouble.

At the hospital a staff member calls the police, who arrest Gary in his hospital bed, wheel him before a judge, then drive him 30 miles away to the state prison hospital. His court-appointed lawyer does not return our calls. We cannot get the prison to approve a visit. Gary has disappeared down a black hole.

Four months later a judge drops the charges. The county social services department gets a call from the prison saying that Gary is being handed over to the department's care and invites us to an emergency meeting where we try to figure out what we can do. Gary is delivered to a sister's apartment. He is

smiling, his voice stronger. "I'm just happy to be alive," he says. "I watched them wheel a lot of people out of there cold."

A doctor comes to remove bandages from his feet and unleashes the odor of rotting flesh. Skin hangs from Gary's heels like the limp stems of a tomato vine at the end of long, hot summer. The doctor says Gary should have been turned every four to six hours. She asks us to help roll him over to see a wound at the base of his back that's so large I could put my fist in it. "This is a disgrace," the doctor says, shaking her head.

It takes a while, but the doctor gets Gary into a rehab program. They put him on a pressure-relieving bed, begin treating

his wounds in earnest and start to get him off his back for the first time in eight months. The physical therapists are amazed by his progress. They start to talk to him about going home, but Gary doesn't have a home. The sister is nowhere to be found. Gary asks if he can come to Rutba House.

"I know y'all gonna have to have one of your meetings to talk about it," he says. We do. His physical needs present a set of daunting challenges: we would have to rearrange one of our houses, build a handicap ramp, take shifts to make sure someone is always home. Logistically complicated, but doable. The bigger challenges, it seems, are relational. Someone in our neighborhood tried to kill

Gary. Can he be safe in our home? Can we? We decide we cannot know, that this is a risk that love may compel us to take.

But what about Gary's relationship with us? We've had eight years of this complicated dance to reflect on—seeing him come close, then watching him leave. Can we trust one another enough to take this step? This isn't just a matter of stopping by for dinner.

After we have said yes, Leah goes to a meeting with social workers at the hospital. They sit with file folders open, reading the story in case notes and incident reports. As they talk about details, the tension grows. Leah senses that these women cannot imagine a future for Gary and feel that she is naive. They push; Leah pushes back. Finally, one of them states their skepticism. "Do you have any idea what you are doing?"

"No," Leah says, and the social worker throws her hands up, as if to say that's what she's been thinking. "Finally," the social worker seems to say, as if she can now get on the task of locating a nursing home to put Gary in.

But Leah is not finished. "Of course we don't know what we're doing. But neither did I know what I was doing when I had a baby. We got help from midwives who knew more than we did. We leaned on friends and family. We figured it out as we went. I don't think we ever know what we're doing in situations like this."

No, we don't know what we're doing. As far as we can tell, this being a hospitality house—this experiment in welcoming everyone no matter what, in meeting Jesus in the stranger—makes you an expert at nothing. But the not knowing is itself a gift. It is an invitation, even.

When you cannot know for sure, you learn to trust. As it turns out, trust has its own way of being in the world. **CC**



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by Carol Zaleski

Plain speech

A FEW WEEKS AGO we turned over our old car to our son; it required changing our insurance policy, transferring the title and canceling our plates so that he could register and insure the car in his own name. A friendly insurance agent helped us through the process—but it took 48 e-mail messages back and forth to establish the correct version of all the forms. With each revision, new errors crept in—the old garaging location substituted for the new, the model name Spoonerized, the zip code altered to the number of the Beast. Each data entry field was a pit and snare. In retrospect, I realized that it would have been much easier to visit the insurance office in person; a face-to-face meeting would have spared us endless misunderstandings.

Between e-mail messages, I followed the press coverage of the lengthy interview Pope Francis gave in August to Antonio Spadaro SJ, editor-in-chief of the Italian Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, on behalf of several Jesuit journals, among them *America* magazine. After commissioning five experts to translate the Italian transcript, *America* published the interview in full for English-language readers; the result was a media sensation. The interview touched on the pope's self-understanding ("I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon"), his experience of World Youth Day, his understanding of the essential mysticism of the Jesuit order's founders, his painful realization of the difference between authority and authoritarianism, his hopes for ecumenism, his prayer life, his favorite artists and theologians, his sense of the holiness of ordinary Christians, and his conviction that what heals wounds, "fascinates and attracts" and "makes the heart burn" should be the touchstone of Christian proclamation.

A small part of the interview concerned sexual morality. Francis observed that sexual morality is not the centerpiece of Catholic moral teaching and should not be talked about incessantly—and the mainstream press, talking incessantly about this subject as it is wont to do, called it a papal bombshell. Francis reiterated the remarks he made in Rio about not judging gays and lesbians, and headlines announced that he had "sent shock waves" through the Roman Catholic Church. Comedian Chris Rock received close to 10,000 "likes" in 24 hours for posting on Facebook, "I might be crazy, but I got this weird feeling that the new pope might be the greatest man alive." Such is the effect of hearing the gospel livingly communicated: shock and delight in equal measure, and, since we are human, no small amount of misunderstanding comes in its wake.

No doubt Francis was aware that his intimate and uncensored way of speaking would provoke misunderstanding. No doubt he was aware that many people would imagine that in

obeying Christ's imperative not to judge, he was jettisoning Catholic doctrine on the sanctity of life, chastity, contraception. Evidently he thought it worth the risk. And I believe he was right. I don't know about Chris Rock, but I suspect that many people will give Catholic social and moral teachings a second look because of the intimate, frank, humble and nonjudgmental words and actions of this teaching pope.

There would be plenty of opportunities to present the full panoply of doctrine—on the day after his interview, Francis gave a resounding affirmation of the church's prolife stance to an audience of obstetricians and gynecologists—but in his interview he spoke as a doctor of souls: "It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else."

There is a general lesson in all this. We tend to think, with all the media at our disposal, that we are well equipped for the art of communication; we imagine that we are more sensitive than our ancestors to the ethnic, religious, national or ideological "other." But it is still the case that we often hear what our wishes or fears predispose us to hear. Sometimes it feels as though a thick mist has descended upon us, distorting communications. But then a face shines through the mist and dispels it; we drop our fears and wishes—and hear the message.

True understanding requires an act of good will on our part, too—an exercise of intellectual empathy, an effort, as Francis put it in the interview, to see the whole narrative arc of an institution's history or a person's life. John Henry Newman wrote his *Apologia pro vita sua* in order to put to rest the calumny that he, and his adopted church generally, preferred cunning to truthfulness. C. S. Lewis wrote his memoir, *Surprised by Joy*, "partly to correct one or two false notions that seem to have got about." The irony is that both works are full of episodes in which relationships founder on miscommunication. But to read Newman and Lewis is to see the narrative arc of their lives and of the Christian tradition to which they adhered; and from this seeing comes understanding. Pope Francis is doing something similar. Though he can expect to be misunderstood at first, he is wagering on the much more interesting possibility that a personal connection to his audience will enable him to get his full message across. It's an exciting time for those who cover religion in the press—and a hopeful time for ecumenical and interreligious understanding. A face-to-face meeting, undertaken with good will, dispels the mist.

Carol Zaleski is professor of world religions at Smith College.

IN Review

The body in question

by William H. Willimon

With *The Good Funeral*, the two best writers on American ways of death, burial and grieving have given us our best book on funerals. Most of us who are familiar with Thomas Lynch met him in his poetic, widely acclaimed *The Undertaking*. Thomas Long's funeral book, *Accompany Them with Singing*, is an eloquent, theologically formed plea for the church to recover the theological significance of the Christian funeral. Now the thanatology Toms have combined their considerable writing talent and knowledge. No pastor can be said to be prepared to lead in the essential liturgies of death and dying without having read this book and having shared its truths with the congregation.

In an opening chapter of autobiographical reminiscence, Long shows the major role that the liturgies of burial have played in his vocation. Citing my own testimonial in *Resident Aliens*, he demonstrates how the church's funeral practices have radically changed in only a couple of decades—how we have sold out to the whims of the culture and, in the process, exchanged the treasure that the church has to offer grieving people for a mess of cheap psychotherapeutic platitudes served up by a stand-up comedian in a bogus "Celebration of Life" where the body of the deceased seems to be an embarrassment. Indeed, the body whose death has occasioned the need for burial rituals appears in modern practices to have vaporized so all of us can quickly grab "closure" and "get over it."

Long's memory of his uncle Ed's funeral, in which a simple small-town pastor ministered to grieving family and friends, is one of the many stories with

which he bolsters his claim that planning and leading funerals is one of the most important duties of a pastor. From the moment the pastor showed up among the mourners for Uncle Ed, his presence "disclosed the holy hidden in our grief." "This frail human being, striding across the lawn in his off-the-rack preacher suit, desperately trying to find some words of meaning to speak, brought with him the grace of God, the sudden awareness that we were not merely there to bury a dead relative but to venture out on a sacred pilgrimage."

Lynch, who prefers to be known by the honorable and accurate designation *undertaker*, reiterates his wonderfully straightforward assertion that undertakers are useful in "helping the living get to where they need to be by getting the dead where they need to go." Lynch insightfully argues that the moment some precursor of *Homo sapiens* first honored the cherished body of a deceased member of the tribe by tenderly burying it rather than pushing it over a cliff was the moment the species became human.

Long contributes an excellent discussion that contrasts early Christian practices with the way pagan Romans dealt with dead bodies, arguing that the reverent deposition of bodies is a unique and powerful aspect of Christian witness. Lynch says that a civilization is known by the honest, respectful ways in which it treats the dead.

Their discussion of Jessica Mitford's polemical broadside *The American Way of Death*—a book that revolutionized Americans' attitudes about funerals—accepts Mitford's justifiable criticism of the funeral business but also exposes her subtle but powerful revulsion at the body.

Indeed, the theological theme that

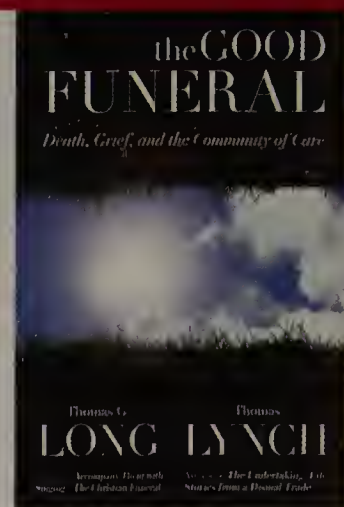
The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care
By Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch
Westminster John Knox, 280 pp., \$25.00

runs through *The Good Funeral* is that bodies matter to Christians in life, in death and in any life beyond death. Long and Lynch charge that many modern critiques of funerals and grief have as a common theme the unchristian—and psychically dangerous—notion that bodies don't matter.

Though he pays homage to the usefulness of and great good that is done by his profession, Lynch is unsparing in his criticism of the abuses and the just plain silliness within the industry. He made me rethink my earlier pastoral advocacy for securing prepaid, prearranged funeral services. Pastors will be both encouraged and shamed by Lynch's deep faith in the way God puts to good use the preparation of bodies for burial, traditions of the wake and extended mourning, community services of worship, and the visible, participatory burial of the body.

The authors clearly admire the church's traditional funeral practices, and they make some hilarious jabs at contemporary aberrations, but they are reluctant to give Christian communities detailed guidance about just what ought to be said and done at funerals. Their aim is to reclaim the funeral as not only an occasion for the church to care for those in grief but also a time to

William H. Willimon teaches the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School. He recently wrote *Incorporation*.



prophetically tell the truth about life and death in the light of Jesus Christ. But Long does insist that the body of the deceased be handled honestly, respectfully and lovingly. Lynch calls contemporary memorial services “bodiless obsequies.”

As Long stresses in his book *Accompany Them with Singing*, a good funeral is an enacted drama in which the living lovingly and faithfully move with the dead to where they need to go while they, the living, process to a new place in their own lives. In the face of our culture’s tendency to lapse into either rank sentimentality or various forms of deceit about death, the good funeral gives meaning to the threatening, often terribly painful separations caused by death. Funerals offer an opportunity for the faith community to boldly say what it believes in the face of death and for us pastors to hold up Christ’s promise of transformation for the living as well as the dead.

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Bonhoeffer the Assassin? Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking

By Mark Thiessen Nation,
Anthony G. Siegrist and Daniel P. Umbel
Baker Academic, 272 pp., \$29.99 paperback

All Bonhoeffer scholarship recognizes the importance of Bonhoeffer’s commitment to peace as well as his advocacy for nonviolence. Some scholarship goes further, arguing that nonviolence was an enduring and overriding commitment for Bonhoeffer that trumped all other commitments through the end of his life. This strand of Bonhoeffer interpretation tends to come from those sympathetic to the Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions, which judge nonviolence and pacifism as central to the faith. This book by Mark Thiessen Nation of Eastern Mennonite Seminary and two of his former students belongs in



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this tradition of Bonhoeffer interpretation. Its best-known advocate, Stanley Hauerwas, contributes a foreword.

Nonviolent Bonhoeffer interpretation faces two challenges. The first is to answer the question of Bonhoeffer's participation in the early 1940s in a resistance movement that included some who conspired to kill Hitler and overthrow the Third Reich. The second is crafting an account of Bonhoeffer's thinking as a

whole that reconciles his clear articulations of nonviolence in the 1930s with earlier and later writings that are not as clear on nonviolence and can even be interpreted as condoning violence in certain very restricted cases.

Hauerwas's work on Bonhoeffer has addressed only the second of these challenges at any length. Nation and his coauthors take both of them head on, devoting a part of the book to each, but I

will focus on the first one. The authors make the novel argument that "there is no evidence" that Bonhoeffer was involved in plots to kill Hitler and that "there is no real evidence" that he affirmed the killing of Hitler. This argument, which boils down to a handful of argumentative moves in the third chapter of the book, is unpersuasive.

My first task, though, is to set aside the provocative (some would say misleading) use of the word *assassin*. In Bonhoeffer and resistance scholarship, a myth of Bonhoeffer the assassin does not exist. Despite the authors' erroneous attribution of such a myth to Larry Rasmussen in his *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*, no scholars claim that Bonhoeffer was an assassin or seriously considered becoming one.

What scholars have argued is that the resistance movement in which Bonhoeffer participated planned for the killing of Hitler, and did so with Bonhoeffer's approval. Nation and his coauthors argue against this position by relying on some of Sabine Damm's conclusions in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance* (2005) while rejecting others. Damm contends that Bonhoeffer's part in "conspiratorial resistance activities" was slight, "a modest balance sheet of operational steps, specific missions, and factual results." The authors use this circumspect conclusion to argue against scholars who have assigned to Bonhoeffer a more central role in the resistance conspiracy. This move is not as revolutionary as the authors make it out to be, however. Damm's book is a synopsis that presents the scholarly consensus on Bonhoeffer and the resistance. Nation and his coauthors simply use Damm's recent scholarship to correct and update older scholarship, such as Eberhard Bethge's biography of Bonhoeffer, originally published in 1967, and Larry Rasmussen's previously mentioned book, published in 1972.

What really matters is the point at which the authors reject Damm's con-



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Reviewed by Michael P. DeJonge, who teaches the history of Christian thought at the University of South Florida. He is the author of Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology.

clusions. In one instance they challenge her claim that Bonhoeffer provided “intellectual pastoral care” to those more central to the conspiracy. The authors’ response:

But let’s be clear. We do not really *know* what Bonhoeffer said in these conversations. To truly know, in any meaningful sense, we would have to have the context for each given conversation—knowing the nature of the subject matter, the occasion for the conversation, Bonhoeffer’s tone of voice and facial expressions, the nature of the person with whom he was speaking, and the nature of their relationship. These are the sorts of factors we would need to know. . . . We simply don’t have that information.

The authors do not challenge Damm with specific historical evidence or with alternative interpretations of evidence. Rather they elevate the standard necessary for historical knowledge to a level that would undermine much of the work we conventionally call history. The authors do not force all historical evidence to clear this high bar; adopting this standard in general would invalidate a great number of the authors’ own statements in the book. The historical evidence that receives this level of scrutiny is only that concerned with Bonhoeffer’s participation in resistance.

In another instance, the authors resist Damm’s position that Bonhoeffer supported killing Hitler. One of several sources for Damm’s claim is Bethge’s report of an incident in his biography of Bonhoeffer. Bethge passes along his

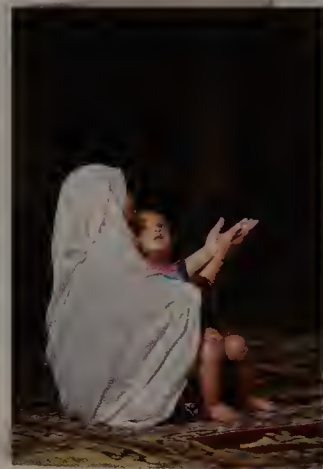
firsthand account of Bonhoeffer’s statement that “if it fell to him to carry out the deed” of killing Hitler as part of a coup d’état, “he was prepared to do so.” Bethge immediately notes that this “was a theoretical statement, of course, since Bonhoeffer knew nothing about guns or explosives.” However, this report is important not only because it directly challenges the authors’ claim that Bonhoeffer did not support attempts on Hitler’s life, but also because it meets the exceptionally high standard for historical evidence the authors at one point invoke.

It is hard to imagine a piece of historical evidence that could more exactly match that standard than this account from Bonhoeffer’s close friend Bethge, who was himself imprisoned for his role in the conspiracy. But the authors sidestep this as well—again, not with specific evidence but with a general point, this time about the unreliability of memory: Bethge was “drawing on decades-old memories” and “memory perhaps is not always accurate.” Again this is special pleading; the authors take recourse to skepticism regarding memory, but only when dealing with evidence related to Bonhoeffer’s resistance activities.

Nation and his coauthors have not provided persuasive reasons for modifying Damm’s position in favor of their own. It may be that the authors are right. It may be that Bonhoeffer was even less involved than Damm portrays. But if the authors are to demonstrate this, and indeed if this strand of Bonhoeffer scholarship is to be taken seriously, the historical evidence will need to be handled more persuasively.

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(from Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics)



Uncollected Poems

By R. S. Thomas; edited by Jason Walford
Davies and Tony Brown

Bloodaxe Books, 192 pp., \$22.95 paperback

Ronald Stuart Thomas, poet and priest of the Church in Wales, died in 2000. With creative energy that spanned the second half of the 20th century, Thomas produced dozens of volumes of original work. The poems in the present volume, published now in the centenary of his birth, appeared in journals and newspapers throughout his long literary career.

Thomas served as a parish priest for 40 years. His poem "Vocation" is a reflection on parish ministry that lightly traces the sacramental offerings of the church from the point of view of a settled priest. Against long predictable absences and reappearances of the people, and against the challenges of changing times, the priest maintains a patient sacramental presence: "Against times / That infect I offer my / Priceless inoculation."

In a 1990 interview Thomas said, "Who can be dogmatic about Christ? He was a poet and he drew his imagery largely from nature." Thomas listened for Christ in voices from the sea and from the fields of Wales. He wrote in 1986 that he "moved in unimportant cir-

cles, avoiding or being excluded from the busier and more imposing walks of life" and that he was "rarely happy in numerous company and kept out of literary circles." He described his poetic method as growing out of a "small talent for turning limited thoughts and experience and meditation on them into verse."

Although he may have been a homebody, Thomas was honored in his lifetime with prizes befitting an important poet. In 1996 he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Still, he remains a contradictory and perplexing figure to many readers and critics.

Few examples of Thomas's more difficult poems are included in this volume. Still, readers of this collection who look to the Christian priest-poet for tender verses or warm devotions might be put off by his blunt assessments of people and by his jagged, enjambed lines. In "Thoughts by the Sea" from 1968, for example, the poet looks out on beachgoers and thinks about "the consortium of fools . . . / . . . without poetry, without art."

An Oxford professor of poetry said that Thomas wrote on "depressing" subjects—for example, the general decline of imagination and belief, and the disappearance of old, rooted ways

Reviewed by Jeffrey Johnson, pastor at Peace Lutheran Church in Wayland, Massachusetts.

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of Welsh life. The same professor said that in his later poems Thomas gave up even the rhythm and form that in part redeemed his work. For his part, Thomas once said, "We are all afraid of laughter, of being called soft or sentimental; and certainly such states destroy art." Throughout the full decades of his literary career, the words *soft* and *sentimental* were rarely if ever used in appraisals of his poems. In the poem "The Father Dies," he called love "a fine thing / but destructive"

Such hard discipline notwithstanding, this volume contains at least one straight-on love poem. "Luminary" shines with time-tested human love and presents two important threads that run through Thomas's work: the imagination-sapping, soul-draining invasion of technology and the constant if ignored invitations of the natural world, often represented by birds and their singing, which Thomas heard and studied as an amateur ornithologist. Thomas was the son of a seafarer, and the sea remained a spiritual home to him through the years. A short poem titled "Dimensions" shows the mystery of the sea paired with the unreachable mystery of childhood.

As a nature poet Thomas did not romanticize the natural world or let feelings overrun thinking. As a pastoral poet of Welsh village life, he did not patronize the people he knew by imagining them to be noble or virtuous or by pitying them. The poem "Cancellation" reflects an artistic decision to turn from the natural world and the rural people around him to more abstract and theological topics, such as God's relation to the 20th-century world of science and technology. This decision marked an evolution in Thomas's art, leading to sustained attempts to work with the terms of the forces that were bringing great changes to the world around him.

Thomas said that he preferred being outdoors to being in the classroom or the study. Speaking to a television reporter in the year he was nominated for the Nobel Prize, he said that he might be remembered for a few of his poems, but that as a man he hoped that people might benefit from his example of living close to the earth and listening to the voices of its creatures.

BookMarks

The Longest Road: Overland in Search of America, from Key West to the Arctic Ocean

By Philip Caputo

Henry Holt and Company, 320 pp., \$28.00

After his elderly father died and he himself was approaching 70, Caputo took a road trip, cutting diagonally across America and a corner of Canada. Along the way, from Key West to Alaska, he asked people what keeps America together despite its diversity and political polarization. What makes the *pluribus unum*? The responses were as different as the people he encountered: the opportunity to try new things, the chance for immigrants to start a new life, the space for expansion and a sense of hope. What makes you think Americans are holding together? one person asked. Caputo makes the counterintuitive observation that conflict keeps us together—the fundamental conflict between two different visions of America: the Jeffersonian, which promotes individual freedom, and the Hamiltonian, which advocates strong, centralized government. "Too much Jefferson leads to anarchy; too much Hamilton to tyranny."

What W. H. Auden Can Do for You

By Alexander McCall Smith

Princeton University Press, 152 pp., \$19.95

It is no surprise to people who have read Smith's novels that he has an appreciation for the poetry of W. H. Auden, since his fictional figure Isabel Dalhousie—Edinburgh philosopher and detective—looks to Auden for guidance. Auden would likely challenge the notion that his poetry can do anything for the reader, but Smith claims that Auden can change one's life and is particularly helpful in finding one's way through the dark places of life. Auden's "September 1, 1939" was widely circulated after 9/11, despite the fact that Auden had disparaged the poem himself. The book is part of Princeton's Writers on Writers series.

The Duck at prayer

To enliven a sermon recently, I quoted a line from *Duck Dynasty*, one of the most-watched shows on cable TV. In case you haven't noticed, the Duck is ruling the world. Three of the top 25 books on the *New York Times* best-seller list are written by members of the dynasty to which *Duck Dynasty* refers—the Robertson family.

Si Robertson's *Si-cology 1* has hit no. one, with his brother Phil's *Happy Happy Happy* close behind. In the South it is hard to pass through a hardware store or even a convenience store without running a gauntlet of *Duck Dynasty* merchandise. Rumors suggest that the show's star, Willie Robertson, may run for Congress.

Duck Dynasty, which is in its fourth year on A&E, is a highly scripted reality show. Think *The Beverly Hillbillies* meets *Jersey Shore*.

The Robertsons are real people, but the situations and the comedic timing suggest that the shows are carefully contrived. Every episode joins a campy scenario (a cookoff between men and women, failed efforts to lose weight, fishing contests) to interviews with cast members.

The Robertsons struck it rich with a company that makes duck calls, Duck Commander, which they run in their hometown of West Monroe, Louisiana. The show makes a lot of the difficulty of owning a family business. Bad employees aren't fired because it's impossible to fire members of the family. Willie worries that the family's wealth will mean that his children will be more yuppie than redneck.

While the Robertsons hunt, fish and frolic in the swamp, they have cash to spare, and the incongruity between their

money and their redneck lifestyle provides most of the entertainment. That and the beards. The Robertson men almost all have long hair and long beards. While they proudly refer to themselves as rednecks, I'm not imagining much sunburn.

Part of the success of the show is its well-scripted comedy. Jase Robertson is the hilarious younger brother employed by Willie, who is CEO of Duck Commander. Jase uses self-deprecating, laid-back humor to express his family's realities: "The girls don't get this whole redneck feng shui thing we got going on," he complains.

Uncle Si has grabbed a lot of screen time as the family's nonsense-spewing

Reviewed by Jason Byassee, senior pastor at Boone United Methodist Church in North Carolina.



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FAMILY DINNER: Patriarch Phil Robertson (center) and family sit down to pray and eat together at the end of each episode.

guru. In one episode, the men slyly ask their braggart uncle why he doesn't know a famous NASCAR driver. He replies, "Hey, look here, Jack, 20 million people in the world, am I supposed to know them all?"

When Willie takes his 16-year-old and as yet unbearded son to buy a car, he first talks to his friend Mountain Man, and then to a man named Squirrel. Willie laments to the camera, "I have got to start dealing with people who have honest-to-God first names."

In another episode, Phil takes his grandsons squirrel hunting and returns home to peel the furry hides off the carcasses. Viewers and the younger Robertsons stare at a massive, disgusting bowl of skinless squirrel. But when Phil feeds his wife, Miss Kay, the matriarch of the Robertsons, a bite, she purrs with contentment. "Don't marry little yuppy girls," comments Phil. "Find you a woman who will eat squirrel brains."

Phil is the Robertson most likely to be

quoted approvingly in conservative Christian circles. He very occasionally recites culture war talking points. He also loathes beavers and sets off dynamite in swamps to defeat them. ("Fire in the hole!")

Most of the show derives its humor from class incongruities. Every episode opens with ZZ Top's song "Sharp Dressed Man," played over a sequence of bling—gold rings, canes, tuxedos—transferred to the world of camouflage design and shorts.

Race is perhaps a more troubling aspect of the show—troubling in the fact of its absence. West Monroe is depicted as a town without minorities, despite the fact that in real life it has a large African-American population.

At the end of every show, a mandolin melody kicks in, and Phil blesses the food the family has gathered to eat: frog legs, fish, deer meat, even road kill. Yes, this popular show has a prayer in every episode. The Robertsons attend White's Ferry Road Church of Christ, though the

denomination is not identified on screen. The church is in West Monroe and appears more suburban than swampland in style. Brother Alan, who first turns up in season three, is a minister and the only beardless son.

Several Robertsons have complained off camera that their religiosity is not fully depicted by the show's producers. What is depicted of church is pretty ordinary: preparing food for festivals, dressing up like Santa to present gifts. In a speech on YouTube, Willie says that he has gotten more criticism of the show from fellow church members than from anyone else. Though it's a show that most of America would find extraordinarily pietistic, a lot of church folks find it not pious enough. Willie encourages them to take the long view: the Duck is having a cultural impact for Jesus.

Duck Dynasty is mostly just funny. Tune in to see what people are watching and to know what youth are referring to when they say, "Happy happy happy."

THEN & NOW

edited by **Edward J. Blum**

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THE
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CENTURY

by Philip Jenkins

Lusophone evangelism

In 1999, the former Portuguese colony of Macau reverted to Chinese sovereignty. A decade later, Macau's Catholic Bishop José Lai Hung-seng stressed the positive impact the move had had on his church. He was pleased to report on new opportunities to build bridges with other churches around the world, especially in Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere in Asia. If Macau was now definitively part of China, it was still proud to belong to a global community hundreds of millions strong, the world of Portuguese heritage—Lusophonia.

The global map of Christianity owes much to the European empires that originally spread the faith, and this remains true long after the empires themselves have crumbled. The world's churches still show the traces of the old British, French and Spanish colonial systems. Beyond spreading their languages, those empires formed patterns of mission and migration that continue to determine religious faith and practice.

Least well known to Americans is the oldest of the European empires, the Portuguese. In the 15th and 16th centuries the Portuguese built a sprawling empire in Brazil, in southern and western Africa, in Goa (India) and in the East Indies. Macau itself became a Portuguese possession in 1557. Although Portugal faded, the empire survived, as did its language and its churches. Not until 1974 did the empire lose its hold

over Angola and Mozambique.

The Portuguese-speaking (Lusophone) world is vast. Today some 250 million speak the language, 80 percent of whom live in Brazil. As Bishop Lai suggested, lands of Portuguese background maintain a lively sense of identity, partly as a protest against Anglo-Saxon cultural dominance. A dozen nations participate in the Lusophony Games.

Lusophonia is a vital component of global Christianity. Naturally enough, the Portuguese justified their expansion in missionary terms and established potent Catholic churches in all their possessions. Brazil, notionally, is the world's largest Catholic country, and 2 million Angolans turned out to greet Pope Benedict when he visited Luanda in 2009. In modern times, Protestant and charismatic insurgents have challenged that old ecclesiastical regime, most famously in Brazil itself.

Worldwide, Portuguese is the language of some 200 million Christians. That's one Christian in every 11. Although Portugal itself long ceased to send out missionaries on any scale, Brazil took up that mantle, making Portuguese one of the most important languages of missionary enterprise. Brazil leads in South-South mission—that is, evangelism from one part of the Global South to another. Brazil's evangelical churches devote fervent efforts

to mission work throughout the Lusophone world, especially in Africa.

The most successful mission has been by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, or IURD), a Pentecostal body oriented to the prosperity gospel and founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1977. The church is highly controversial and has been the subject of investigations and legal cases in several nations. Its critics denounce it as a cynical money-making operation. But despite all the attacks, the IURD has flourished, and it now claims several million members.

Since the early 1990s, the IURD has made Lusophone Africa a primary target for evangelism. The strongly Marxist character of the regimes in Angola and Mozambique made this expansion slower than it would have been elsewhere in Africa, but the IURD's message won a mass audience. Brazilian-style megachurches operate in exploding cities like Maputo and Luanda, along with many smaller IURD temples (churches). The vast rallies and crusades that such churches organize virtually never gain the attention of Western media unless they are accompanied by some calamity, like the crush that killed many in a Luanda service last

year. Mere gatherings of believers running into the millions are just not newsworthy.

Wherever in the world Portuguese is spoken, you will find the fervent missionaries of the IURD. That includes migrant communities in the U.S. and Europe. Other Brazilian Pentecostal churches like God Is Love and Renascer em Cristo (Reborn in Christ) also claim a global reach, with a focus on Lusophone Africa.

After the empires ended, many former subjects migrated to the former imperial homelands in search of better lives. That is a familiar story in countries like Britain and France, but it is also true in Portugal, where migration has transformed religious life. While the country is traditionally Catholic, the population has become much more secular in recent years. Both same-sex marriage and abortion are legal. But immigrants from Africa, Asia and Brazil resist secularization. Brown and black faces outnumbered whites among the throngs who welcomed a papal visit to the country in 2010.

The loss of Macau marked the formal end of a political empire founded before Columbus sailed. But the cultural and religious influence of the Portuguese world is certainly not waning. The imperial ghosts are set to walk for many decades to come.

Philip Jenkins recently wrote Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses.

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Rwanda: Celebrating the Gift of the Heifer "Consolation"; Poland: Brzezowka Village Hen Project; Uganda: Mrs. Nanfuka Teopista's Goats, by Betty LaDuke

Oregon artist Betty LaDuke writes: "My art work is based on multicultural explorations of how we love, live and die. Individual and shared expressions of grief, joy, dignity and hope are the themes of my drawings and paintings." In her color-rich acrylic paintings on panel, she portrays individuals of different cultures accompanied by the gift of animals—cows, chickens, goats—that feed, nurture and sustain their communities.

Art selection and commentary by Lil Copan, a painter and editor in Boston.



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